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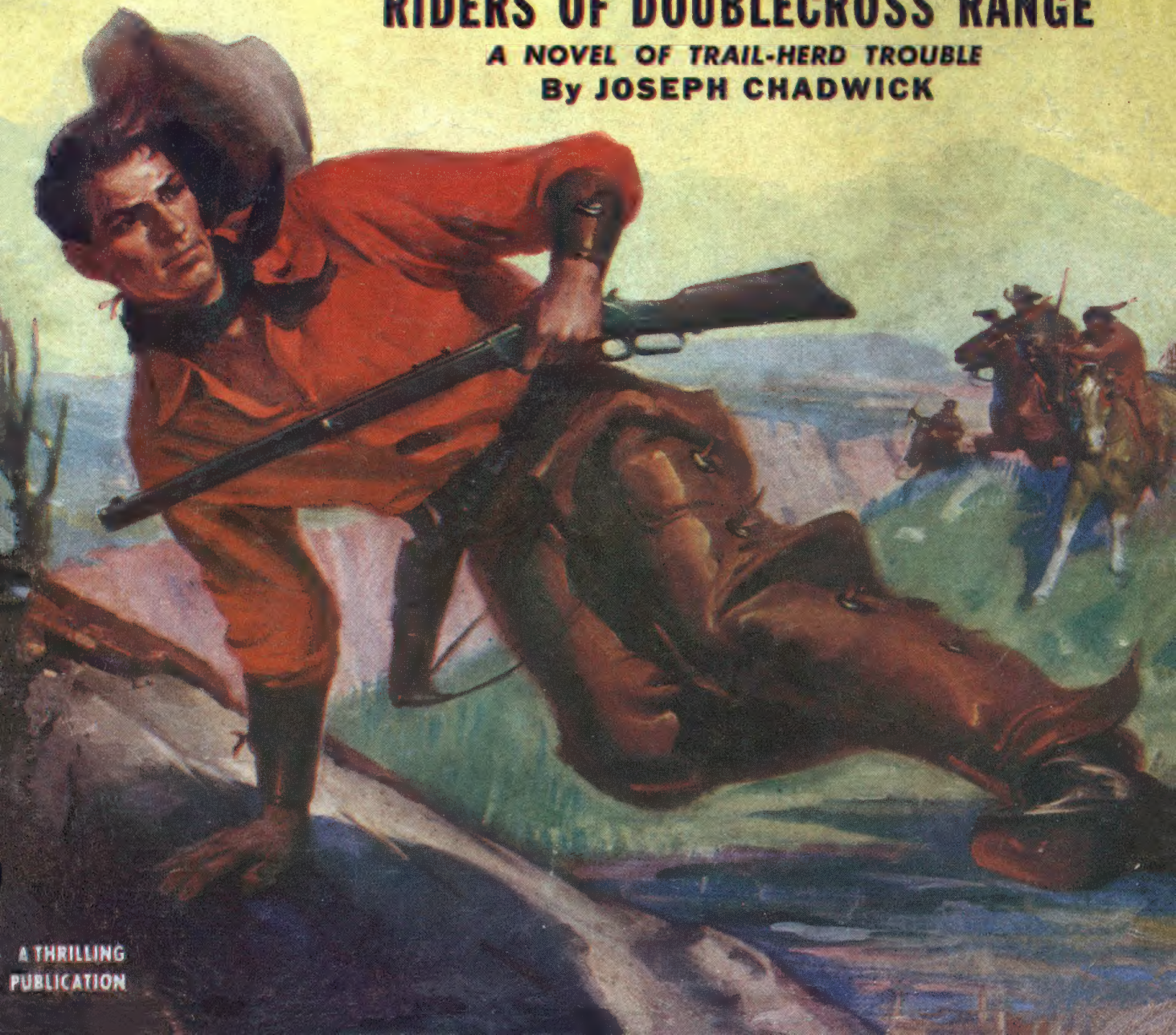

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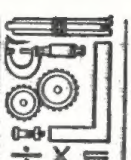

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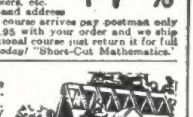

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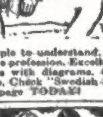

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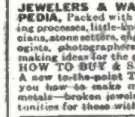

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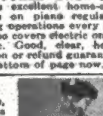

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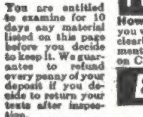

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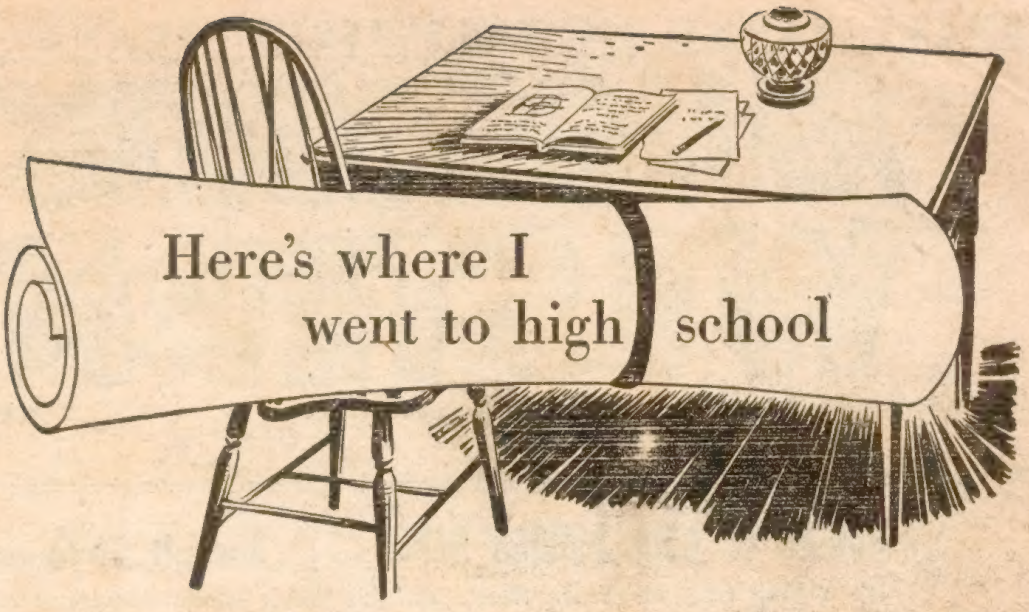

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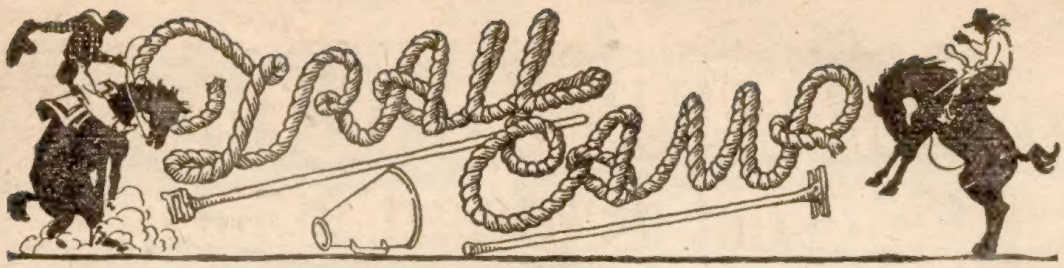

HERO OF THE WARPATH TRAIL

By FERRIS WEDDLE

JAKE MOONEY was a slight man who wore glasses, conservative business suits and a derby. In the wild northwest of the 1870's he was as out-of-place as an Apache in war-dress on New York's Fifth Avenue. In Portland, Oregon, Mooney had a successful fancy goods business. Being ambitious, he decided to expand the business into Washington and Idaho. That was why he was in Walla Walla, Washington, the October day he took the stagecoach for Lewiston, Idaho. And that was why Jake Mooney became the unwilling hero of the most extraordinary Indian raid in Lewiston's history.

In a happy frame of mind, having done good business in Walla Walla, Mooney blithely sat beside the stage driver. On the other side sat a whiskey drummer. This was Mooney's first mistake. Dutch John, the noted northwest stage driver, was also a spinner of yarns. Tale after tale he unfolded for his wide-eyed audience. Mooney was especially attentive, and amazed, and began to think yearningly of being inside the coach.

Indian Raids

An air of authenticity was given the yarns by the fact that the previous year, 1878, southern Idaho and eastern Washington and Oregon had been terrorized by bands of Bannock and Piute Indians that had broken away from their reservations. Northern Idaho still expected Indian trouble. Mooney hadn't known this or he would have stayed in Portland. So, Dutch John's tales of massacres, murders and raids did not brighten his day. The veteran stage driver appeared to be intimately acquainted with all the facts, and if he didn't know them, he made use of an amazing imagination.

Expecting an Indian attack at any moment, Mooney was visibly shaken when the stage clattered into the Indian village of Alpowa. He quavered when suddenly Dutch John shouted and pointed.

Following the pointing handle of the bullwhip, Mooney saw a squaw who appeared to be innocently shaking out a bright red blanket.

"It's a signal for the varmints to attack us!" Dutch John yelled and plied the whip to his six-horse team.

Mooney held himself as low as possible, a prayer in his mind. The other passenger had caught onto Dutch John's plan and played along by putting a hole through his hat with a derringer. Mooney didn't hear the shot above the noise of the stage.

"Man, was that close!" Dutch John remarked as he finally pulled the puffing team to a slow walk.

"Yeah, close is right," the whiskey drummer muttered, holding up his hat with the hole in it.

Mooney paled and gasped. Dutch John began to spin more hair-raising yarns, until finally the little man raised his voice in a protesting croak. "If you don't mind—I—I—I'd prefer to ride inside a while. The heat is getting me."

Laughing behind his whiskers Dutch John allowed his passenger to climb into the coach, then cracked the whip over his team's back, speeding on to Lewiston, where he pulled in on schedule at about twilight at the Raymond Hotel and depot.

Back to Civilization!

Mooney, dusty and shaken, had just one idea in mind: to transact his business and get back to civilization! So he hurriedly cleaned up and headed for the first place of business he was to contact. The dark-faced Nez Perce Indians that sauntered through the town, the rough voiced, high-heeled cowpokes and the bearded miners did not increase his peace of mind.

(Continued on page 127)

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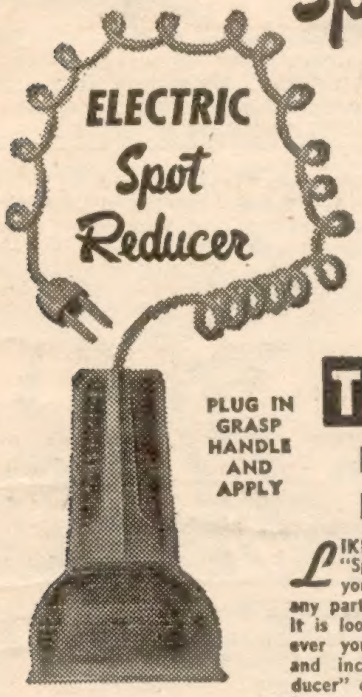

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BILL STOPPED THE WILD BOAR'S CHARGE AND THEN...

WILD TURKEY HUNTING IN A SOUTHERN NATIONAL FOREST CAN HARDLY BE CLASSED AS A DANGEROUS SPORT, BUT WHEN A WOUNDED WILD BOAR INTRUDES...

BANG! BANG!
NAILED HIM, EH? WHAT THE...!
I FIGURED HE'D HEAD FOR THE CLEARING. SO, I TOOK A SHORT-CUT AND...
GOT HERE JUST IN TIME TO SAVE MY LIFE!
WHEN WE BORROWED JEB'S CAR, WE SHOULDA TAKEN HIS TRAILER, TOO
WHY THAT'S JEB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!
THAT'S ME, ALL RIGHT!

WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
UNCLE JEB, YOU'RE A PEACH
SHE'S LOVELY
LATER
BLADES. YOU BET! TRY THIS THIN GILLETTE
WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR DOWN HERE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

HE'S A FINE YOUNG MAN. EXCELLENT APPEARANCE AND VERY INTELLIGENT
I KNEW YOU'D LIKE HIM, COLONEL. I'VE APPROACHED HIM REGARDING A JUNIOR PARTNERSHIP
YOU ENJOY SWELL, EASY SHAVES... QUICK AND CLEAN...WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY ARE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD AND FAR OUTLAST ALL OTHERS. MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES CANNOT SCRAPE OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT 10-BLADE PACKAGE
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10-25¢ 4-10¢
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Ranch and Range

Little Known Facts About the West

ALL kinds of people went West to find gold. This particular man was known to the miners as "Buckshot" and he found the precious metal on the Mokelumne. He might have been forty years of age or perhaps fifty. His face was but slightly wrinkled and he wore a heavy black beard which grew nearly to his eyes and entirely concealed his mouth.

When he removed his worn and dusty felt hat, which was but seldom, you gazed at his large, square forehead, bald crown, and serious gray eyes. There was the flannel shirt he always wore and his belt had a rather efficient knife.

Buckshot lived alone in a small tent. But his tastes were exceedingly luxurious. He always had the best of everything in the market regardless of its cost. That included the finest hams at a dollar and a half the pound; preserved oysters, corn, and peas, at six dollars a canister; onions and potatoes whenever such articles made their appearances; Chinese sweetmeats and dried fruits; —and of course his bottle of champagne. He did all his own cooking.

The other miners claimed Buckshot had taken out between thirty and forty thousand dollars in gold. And they also said he spent it all for food.

So while others gambled it away in the dens of iniquity; and still others spent it on wild dames—Buckshot literally ate his own little fortune.

An Obstinate Burro

THE script called for Actor Burt Lancaster to ride a burro across some sand dunes. But the burro was in one of his balky moods and wouldn't budge. Finally, after considerable delay and expensive hold-up to production, a wrangler who'd been called on for assistance had an idea. He asked for a tractor. It was hooked to a big land-leveling sled borrowed from a nearby ranch.

The animal was shoved aboard. Lancaster mounted and the tractor moved off. Although the animal was standing perfectly still, you won't be able to notice it in the movie. Only the upper regions of the obstinate critter were photographed.

Safety in Central City

THE Daily Register of Central City in 1872 carried the following item:

"The parlors of the Teller House are elegant. The sleeping rooms are fitted with essential conveniences. Since the majority are without transoms, guests may slumber peacefully undisturbed by worry that their heads may be blown off or their jewels stolen."

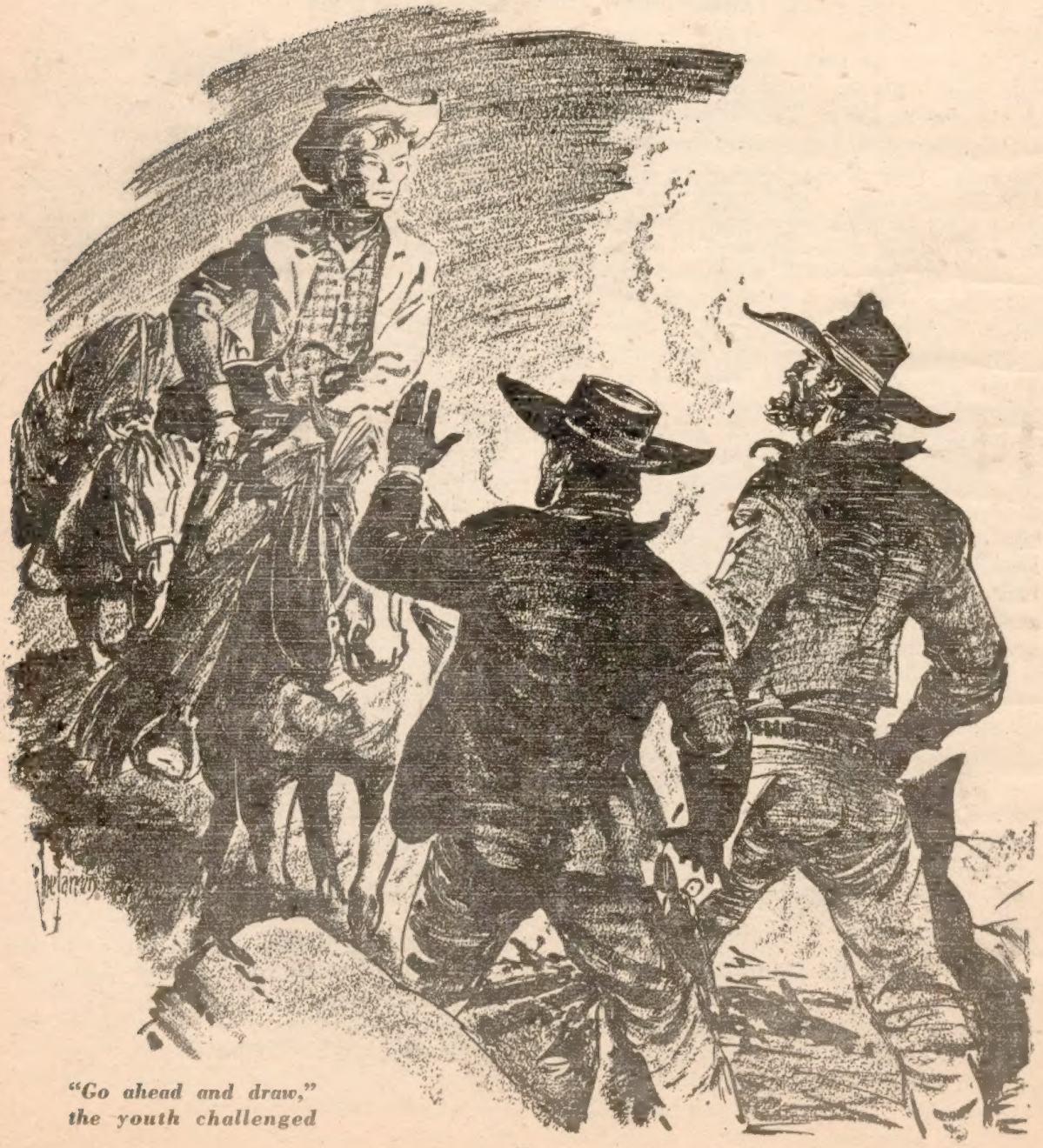
It's the Law

UNDER the law of the Guajira Indian tribe, a thief hurt while trespassing on the property of an intended victim can demand, and get, compensation from the property owner.

The Last Great Outlaws

AMERICA'S new playground, the enlarged Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado and Utah, includes the headquarters and fortress of the last great outlaws of the West, "The Wild Bunch," who terrorized banks and railroads up until the turn of the 20th century.

RIDERS of DOUBLECROSS



"Go ahead and draw," the youth challenged

RANGE

A Novel by JOSEPH CHADWICK

It's a long trail for Steve Reese and his pards when they read sign on a young ranny who has vanished with his Dad's cow money

CHAPTER I

Dodge City

HE WAS a young man, still a mere youth, slightly built and of but medium weight. But he felt as tall in the saddle as any man, tall and proud. For good reason. Dan Garrett was his name—Dan Garrett, trail-boss. He had brought a herd of Texas cattle up the Chisholm Trail, and sold it here in Dodge City for more than seventeen thousand dollars. His saddle-bags were heavy with gold and silver specie. It was night, a rainy night.

The cattle buyer stood in the doorway of his shack office, a portly figure against the glow of lamplight. An amiable man named Cressup. He puffed on his cigar, eyed Dan Garrett worriedly, and said, "Be careful, son. You're packing a lot of money, and Dodge is a mighty ornery place. It's not only fools

Dan Garrett's First Visit to Dodge City Sets

and their money that are soon parted in this town. Even plumb smart hombres—"

Dan Garrett laughed. "Ain't staying in Dodge, not even one night," he said. "I'm making tracks out of here, pronto. My trail hands are squandering their pay, having themselves a time, but me, I'm pulling out right now."

He leaned from the saddle, shook hands with Cressup, who said, "Luck, son. And give my regards to old Sam when you get home."

He turned back into his office, closed the door, and Dan caught up the lead rope of his pack-horse. So neither man saw a shadowy figure glide away from a freight wagon that stood nearby and, at a dog-trot, hurry along Front Street which was tonight, because of the downpour, all but deserted.

Dan Garrett rode slowly along the street, admitting to himself that he would like to sample some of Dodge's rowdy sport. He was young, and this was his first visit to the fabulous town of which he had heard so much. He envied the cowhands who had come up the long, hard trail with him. They had no such responsibility as he had, and so could paint the town a bright shade of red.

Maybe next trip—Sure, Sam Garrett's broken leg would be sound by the time they pointed another trail north and he, instead of Dan, would be the trail boss. Sam would take care of the money, and Dan could have himself a time.

DODGE CITY was mostly Front Street, and Front Street was a long, seemingly endless row of grubby clapboard buildings facing the railroad tracks. There were more saloons, gambling dives, and honkytonks in that row than any other town on the plains could boast.

Texas trail drivers came to find sport in those places; and railroad men and buffalo-hunters and soldiers from nearby Fort Dodge. And shifty-eyed men who traded whiskey and guns to the Indians; bull-whackers and muleskinners; badmen and tinhorns; dude sportsmen who came from the East and from Europe to shoot buffalo and to sample life in the raw.

The lights were bright. They beckoned to a man. But young Dan Garrett closed his mind if not his eyes to the glitter. He passed them by—the Alamo, the Stockman, the Long Branch, the Lone Star, Kelly's Place, Sugar's Place, Ann Flitchee's Place, the Lady Gay Theatre. He heard music and the laughter of women, of the gay ladies of Dodge, but he heeded no siren's song.

Along the dark side of the street were more idle wagons than Dan had ever seen before, and on the railroad tracks, along which buffalo hides were piled twenty feet high, a locomotive chugged and puffed as it busily made up a freight train. Then Dan saw her.

She was walking alone in the rain, hurrying, holding her skirt so its hem didn't touch the wet ground. She wore a cloak with a hood as protection against the rain, but the hood didn't hide her face from Dan Garrett's quickly interested eyes. It was a young and pretty face, and a damp wisp of blonde hair lay against her forehead. Dan saw so much as she passed a lighted window. Then suddenly she was no longer alone. A man—drunk, judging by the way he staggered—accosted her.

Dan reined in, anger rising in him.

The girl tried to evade the drunk, but he caught hold of her. She struggled, cried out, then looked pleadingly toward Dan Garrett. He dropped down from his horse, ran forward. He grabbed the drunk by the arm, whirled him about, drove a fist into the man's whiskery face. It was a solid blow, and drunk fell heavily and lay sprawled on his back.

Dan waited, another blow ready, but the hit man didn't attempt to pick himself up. Turning to the girl, Dan asked, "You're all right, ma'am?"

"Yes." Her voice was shaky. "Yes, I'm all right. I'm so grateful."

"I'd better see you home."

"Well—thank you."

He went out into the street to get his

horses, then led them as he walked beside the girl. He introduced himself, a bit proud and a lot pleased. It wasn't every day that a cowhand rescued a pretty girl. He said, "I'm from Texas, ma'am. Came up with a trail herd."

"My name is Bonnie," she said. "I—We turn here, Mister Garrett."

It was a dark alleyway, inky black. Dan

STEVE REESE
Field Chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association

could see nothing but the shadowy figure of the girl, once he turned into the alley with her. But then, he didn't look for anything else.

He was young, she was pretty—

Too late Dan sensed danger. Two figures loomed out of the darkness, rushed at him. A gun-barrel struck him at the base of the skull.

Pain exploded inside him. His brain reeled, his vision blurred, his knees buckled. He was clubbed a second time on the way down. But for all the pain, he didn't wholly lose consciousness.

He was dimly aware that a third man had appeared, and that this man said, "All right, that does it. You know what to do with him."

The girl who called herself Bonnie said nervously, "You won't hurt him any more? You won't—won't kill him?" Her voice sounded frightened.

THE man who had spoken before answered, "We've got something else planned."

He had a low-toned voice that was gruff with the authority of a man accustomed to talking down to hirelings. "Just don't get squeamish now." He turned to Dan's two assailants. "Pick him up and bring him along. I'll take a look along the street, but the chances are that the Law is staying indoors on a night like this."

The dimly conscious Dan Garrett was lifted, carried. They took him across Front Street to the railroad tracks. They tossed him, like a sack of grain, into a boxcar, then slid the door closed and secured its iron catch.

A railroad man who carried a lantern appeared, holding out his right hand. The man of authority—a bulky, florid, well-dressed man—paid out some money to the hand.

"You're sure this car is going out tonight?"

"Sure, I'm sure," the railroad man said. "Don't worry about it."

The bulky man seemed to hesitate for a moment, then he shrugged and turned away. The two hardcases followed him. The girl had disappeared.

The railroad man, hand raised, signaled with his lantern, and shortly an engine and tender eased onto the siding to pick up the boxcar.

The puffing of the locomotive, along with the drumming of the rain, drowned out the feeble pounding against the inside of the car door.

CHAPTER II

Manhunt in Town

ARRIVING at Dodge City by stage coach from Valido, Texas, Steve Reese, field chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association in Austin, took a room at the National House. He washed, shaved, donned a clean shirt, then went to the dining room downstairs for supper. After the meal, he stepped out onto Front Street and rolled a cigarette. He lighted up, smoked thoughtfully, while standing before the hotel, with the town's restless population flowing past him.

Tough town Dodge City might be, but it impressed Reese not at all. He had visited it on other occasions. Too, he was acquainted with most of the West's tough boomtowns and he had, in fact, helped tame more than one of them.

He was in appearance little different from numerous Texas cattlemen to be run across in Dodge. He wore a flat-crowned gray Stetson, faded levis, a gray shirt, a brush-scarred corduroy coat, boots that had seen much service. He looked lean and fit, hard-muscled. His skin was bronzed by exposure to sun and wind.

And yet he was different, somehow, and the passersby who noticed him were aware of that.

A gaudily dressed woman, one of Dodge's notorious gay ladies, eyed him flirtatiously but then, taking a closer look, her smile faded and her gaze wavered. A dudish tinhorn looking for an easy mark stopped to make Reese's acquaintance, but on second thought merely nodded and went on to find other game. A half-drunk ruffian spoiling for a fight jostled Reese, then looked at the man and, without picking his quarrel, muttered an apology and staggered away.

This difference was, perhaps, in the somber cast of his face. Or maybe in the steely, probing look of his dark eyes. At any rate, here was a man not even tough Dodge City was going to bother.

His cigarette smoked, he dropped it, flattened it beneath his boot heel. He walked along Front Street, coming finally to a shack-office bearing a sign that read:

J. B. CRESSUP, CATTLE DEALER

There was a yellow glow of lamplight through the grimy front window. Reese opened the door, stepped inside, and a fat man seated at a roll-top desk, who was busily writing in an account book, lifted his bald head. Shrewd eyes sized up Reese, a smile welcomed him.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"Mr. Cressup?"

"J. B.," the man said. "Jess, to most Texas cattlemen."

"I've got no herd looking for a buyer," Reese said. He pulled a chair away from the wall, straddled it, folded its arms across its back. "I'm from the Cattlemen's Protective Association, Jess. Steve Reese is the name."

"Heard of you. Shake."

They shook.

Reese said, "I'm interested in a man named Garrett. Dan Garrett. A young bucko. He sold you a herd of Texas cattle three months ago. You paid him his money, and that's the last his foster father, Sam Garrett, down in Valido, knows about him. Sam sent a couple of his riders back up here to look for the boy, who started back home alone while his trail hands set out to paint Dodge a bright shade of red." He saw Cressup nod. "They talked to you?"

"Yeah. I helped them look around for young Dan."

"And found no trace of him?"

"It was like he vanished into thin air."

REESE'S somber face showed a thin smile. "I've been a CPA field chief for a long time," he said. "Before that I was a detective on the St. Louis Police Force. I've encountered plenty of missing persons cases, and there was always some kind of a trace. If I didn't believe that Dan Garrett had left some sign, I wouldn't have come to Dodge."

Cressup nodded. "You should know. But those two Garrett hands didn't find a thing. Neither did I. If you talked with them, you

Dan turned into the alley with the girl and did not sense danger until too late

know that already. My idea is that young Dan left town that night, and was killed for the cattle money. The killer buried the body in a lonely spot, and headed for parts unknown."

"What about Dan's horses?" Reese asked. "His mount and his pack-animal?"

"The killer could have used them to make his getaway, and he could be a thousand miles from here by now," Cressup said. "I know Sam Garrett, and I feel mighty sorry for him—losing all that money and his adopted son, too. He thought the world of that boy. But I can't see that anything can be done about it. And I'm not slighting you as a manhunter, friend."

Reese rubbed his square-hewn chin, frowning with thought. "Sam believes as you do," he said then. "That Dan was killed for the money. Or he claims to believe that. Deep inside he probably has a fear that Dan betrayed him—ran off with the money. He's a proud old rannihan, and because of his pride he didn't ask the CPA for help, even though he is a member of the Association. He'd rather make no attempt to recover his

money than to learn that he's been double-crossed by a youth whom he loved like a flesh-and-blood son."

"Who asked the CPA to investigate?"

"A man named Jim Haskell."

"The banker at Valido?"

"You know him?"

Cressup nodded. "A square-shooter. A banker with a heart."

"I figured him like that," Reese said. "Haskell holds a mortgage on the Garrett ranch. He expected Sam to pay it off with that seventeen thousand dollars. He doesn't want to foreclose, and so he asked my outfit to find Dan—or rather, the money. Sam is sixty-five, crippled from a horse falling on him last spring. He's got nobody, now that the young fellow is missing. Only those two mossyhorn cowhands, and they're not worth a whole lot. His being in such bad shape is why he had Dan trail that herd to Dodge, and why he didn't come searching for him. Sam is one of those ne'er-do-wells. A whole lifetime in the cattle business, and still he's only a two-bit cowman with a mortgaged ranch."

"And he'll lose it now?"

"Haskell can't carry him along forever."

"I guess not. He thinks you can find the killer?"

"Haskell's idea isn't the same as yours," the CPA man said. "He thinks Dan absconded with the money. Haskell tries to be fair-minded, but—well, a man who devotes his life to money can't help being a little narrow in his thinking. Dan was orphaned when he was eight years old. His father was a no-good, and he was killed when on the dodge from the law. His mother died shortly after, of grief. Sam Garrett took the boy in. Haskell has some loco notion that Dan is basically no different than his father, and that he was tempted by all that money. Like father, like son. Bad blood. That's how Haskell figures it."

JESS CRESSUP growled, "Bosh! Nonsense!"

Reese nodded. "I agree," he said. "I can't believe that the boy inherited his father's bad streak. More, I can't see Dan being tempted. In spite of that mortgage, the Garrett ranch is a fine spread, and could be a prosperous one. On Sam's death, Dan would have inherited it. Would he throw a ranch away for money? I doubt it. Some men might, but not a young fellow like Dan who knew nothing but cattle and horses. He'd never been away from the Valido range until he brought that herd up-trail. He was a likable youth with no bad habits. He didn't drink much, hardly ever gambled, and was too bashful to play around with the wrong kind of women. No, I don't think Dan Garrett absconded with that cattle money."

"And if he was killed for it—?"

"I've a hunch that he wasn't killed."

Cressup looked surprised. "What, then?"

Reese shrugged. "I don't know," he replied. "It's just a hunch. It comes, I suppose, of the fact that no body has been found. It's a rare case that sees the killer going to the trouble of hiding his victim's body." The CPA field chief smiled faintly. "Don't ask me what I think happened to Dan. I can't tell you. But I'm going to try my darnedest to find out."

"Where will you start looking?"

"I've started, Jess—with you."

"With me? I told you—"

"I talked with those two cowhands," Reese cut in. "Ed Hutch and Milt Quayne. They're old and stove-in, but they're loyal to Sam Garrett. They figure like Jim Haskell, that Dan maybe ran off with the money. They learned something when they came back to Dodge to search for him, something they didn't mention to Sam, because they know he'd rather believe the boy was killed than to know for sure that he pulled a double-cross. Hutch and Quayne didn't want to tell me about this, for the same reason they didn't tell Sam. It looked as though Dan did abscond with the money. But I suspected they were holding something back, and I tricked them into telling what it was."

He paused to roll and light a cigarette. Then he went on: "Those two old cowboys bumped into a tinhorn sport name Duke Macklin. They were in a saloon, drinking with this hombre, and they told him what they were doing in Dodge. Macklin told them that maybe he knew something. He said that he'd noticed a young Texan answer-

ing Dan Garrett's description with a girl. He noticed them because the Texan was leading his mount and his pack-horse as he walked with the girl. And because they turned into an alleyway, Macklin told Hutch and Quayne about it."

Cressup snorted impatiently. "It could have been *any* Texan," he said. "And the girl could have been taking him to her room. He could have left his horses around back of some building. You know the saying, Reese—about Dodge City and so few decent women. This one might have been after a couple dollars. It could have been any night, not the one when Dan Garrett disappeared."

"It was a rainy night. Duke Macklin was sure of that. He was hurrying along the street, and there weren't many people about because of the rain."

"Say! It *was* raining hard the night Dan started for Texas!"

"Yeah. And then, according to Macklin, there was a long dry spell." The CPA man nodded. "It was dry from that night until several weeks later."

"Did Macklin know the girl?"

"He didn't know her name. He said she worked as a singer and a come-on girl at a cheap saloon called the Trailside."

"Did Hutch and Quayne go looking for her there?"

"Yeah. But she'd disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

REESE nodded, thoughtfully. "She'd left town," he said. "Or so the people at the Trailside told Hutch and Quayne. They believed what they were told, and they sort of took it for granted that Dan had run off with her." The CPA man puffed on his cigarette, his face more somber than usual. "It's possible that he did," he went on. "But I don't believe he did."

Cressup looked excited. "Reese, I've a feeling that you're on the right track," he said. "I know the Trailside. It's a tough place. Only strangers to Dodge ever go there. It had a reputation for rolling drunks. It's owned by a man named Riordan. He bought it a couple months ago—Yeah, about the time Dan disappeared. That's when it changed hands!"

"So the place had a rep for rolling drunks, eh?"

"Yeah, Sheriff Bat Masterson threatened to close it if he got one more complaint about it," Cressup said. "I remember that. He never did close it, so the place must have been cleaned up. I stopped in there once to take a look at that singer. I'd heard that she was something special."

"And?"

"She was. Young, blonde, pretty."

"Just the kind to make a young cowboy lose his head?"

"That's about it. I ought to know her name—Sure. Bonnie, they called her. She was supposed to be Matt Stambaugh's niece."

"Matt Stambaugh?"

"He owned the Trailside at that time."

"Where can I find him?"

Cressup considered a moment. "I think he left town," he finally said. "Anyway, I haven't seen him since Riordan took over the Trailside. And I would have noticed him if he was still around. He was only a saloonkeeper, but you'd have thought he was a big banker or a senator or something. He had an air, that Stambaugh."

Reese smiled, got off his chair. "Obliged to you, friend," he said. "I think I'll pay the Trailside a visit."

"You think that the girl got Dan Garrett to go off with her?" Cressup asked. "You think she knew he had money and got her hooks into him?"

"That could be," the CPA man said. "But I think it was something else. Seventeen thousand dollars is a lot of money. Maybe Matt Stambaugh was watching for a man with a lot of money who would be an easy mark—and spotted Dan Garrett. If he's the kind of hombre you say, he wouldn't be content to go on running a cheap saloon and rolling drunks for a few dollars when there was a chance that he could get his hands on seventeen thousand dollars."

"Then Dan was killed!"

"That could be, too."

"You think that he wasn't, though?"

"I don't know what to think at this point." Reese said, and went to the door. "I'll work on what I know. That is plenty now. Dan or somebody mighty like him was seen with

the girl Bonnie that rainy night. The girl is no longer in Dodge, according to what Hutch and Quayne learned at the Trailside. Matt Stambaugh sold out about the time Dan disappeared. A man could retire from a business that wasn't too profitable if he came into seventeen thousand dollars."

He opened the door, added, "Like I told you, Jess, nobody vanishes without leaving some trace." He smiled faintly and went out.

CHAPTER III

Look for the Woman

THE Trailside, one of Dodge's smaller deadfalls, was a narrow two-storied plank building squeezed in between a general store and a harness shop. The bar ran along the right side, and all the tables were at the rear. There was a piano in a rear corner, with no one playing it at the moment Reese entered. A dozen customers were in the place, most of them at the bar. One bartender was on duty.

Two of the men at the bar were cavalrymen, one looked like a freighter, and the others were trail hands. When the bartender asked, "What'll it be, stranger?" he sized Reese up with shrewd eyes. He was a red-faced man with slicked-down hair and a nose that was crooked from having been broken. He looked like an ex-prizefighter.

Reese dug into his pocket, carelessly tossed a fifty-dollar gold piece onto the bar. "Set them up for everybody," he said easily. "And give us your best, friend, not your usual red-eye."

The bartender's eyes grew shrewder still, looking from the gold coin to its owner and then at it again. He said, "Yes, sir!" and selected a bottle from the back-bar, opened it for the first time, set out glasses, began to pour. He kept glancing at Reese, who was now rolling a cigarette.

It was not the CPA man's habit to flash money in large amounts, and he had done so now for a purpose. He believed that it was possible for lightning to strike twice in the same place, and considered it likely that things could happen here to a man with money even though the Trailside had changed owners.

The bartender served the men at the bar, nodded toward Reese to indicate that the round was on him. They all looked in the CPA man's direction, some nodding thanks and some smiling. The bartender placed glasses on a tray, took them to the three men seated at one of the tables. Returning, he poured himself a drink out of the same bottle. He said, "Here's looking at you, stranger."

Everybody drank, and bartender said to Reese, "Riordan's the name. Pat Riordan."

"Reese. Steve Reese."

"From Texas?"

"That's right. From down around Austin."

"On the house this time," Riordan said, and started refilling the glasses.

Most everyone made the second drink last longer, and Reese merely sampled his. The trail hands were talking about a stampede they'd had one night in Indian Territory. The soldiers were lamenting the bad chow at Fort Dodge. The freighter stared moodily into his glass which he had emptied at a gulp.

Riordan left the bar and went to a door to a rear room, called in to somebody, then returned to the bar. A pale, skinny youth appeared from the back room, sat down at the piano and began to drum on it. A woman in a low-cut, short-skirted red dress appeared and came strolling toward the bar. Reese smiled inwardly. His gold piece was getting results.

The woman was still on the fair side of thirty, he decdied, and attractive enough. She smiled at him; it was a nice, friendly, provocative smile but her eyes failed to reflect it. They were blue eyes, chill blue eyes. She had blonde hair, but it was the brassy blonde that told of bleaching. Her face was heavily painted.

"Hello, stranger," she said. "How about buying Lil a drink?"

"Sure, Lil," Reese said, and told Riordan that he'd pay for another round.

WHEN he and Lil were served, Reese pocketed the change out of his fifty-dollar gold piece and said, "Let's take the weight off our feet." The woman said, "Sure, Handsome." They carried their drinks to one of the tables, seated themselves. Lil saw to it that her chair was close to Reese's.

"Cattleman?" she asked.

He smiled. "Been interested in cattle for a good many years," he said. It was true enough; cattle and cattlemen were the CPA's

HANK BALL

business. But he intended to skirt the truth, if need be. "What happened to the man who used to run this place?" he asked. "Stambaugh."

"Oh, he sold out to Riordan and left town."

"He left Dodge? That's too bad."

"Too bad? What do you mean, Handsome?"

"I owe Stambaugh some money," Reese said, hoping she wouldn't sense that he was lying. "I sat in a poker game with him the last time I was in Dodge. Lost a lot of money, and finally had to give Stambaugh an IOU. For five hundred dollars. Figured I'd redeem that paper, this trip. But if he's left town—"

He was watching the woman from the corner of his eye.

He saw her make a furtive signal to Riordan, then she lifted her glass and said smilingly, "Here's to Texas and Texas men. I like 'em both, Handsome."

Reese drank with her, but only to take a sip from his glass. Riordan appeared immediately with two fresh drinks, removing the other glasses. His face was expressionless, but the CPA man saw him wink at Lil. Riordan moved away without waiting for Reese to pay for the drinks.

Lil said, "Bring your drink, pardner," and stood up. "We'll go back to Pat's office. I think there's a letter back there with Matt Stambaugh's address on it." She smiled invitingly. "Quieter back there, anyway."

Reese eyed his drink distrustfully as he picked it up and rose. He'd seen Lil's signal to Riordan and Riordan's wink to her when he brought the unordered drinks. The CPA man knew plenty about knockout drops. He followed Lil to the back room. It was furnished with a roll-top desk, a couple of chairs, and a couch. Lil closed the door once they were inside, then lifted a hand and caressed Reese's cheek.

"Like me?" she asked.

Reese smiled at her.

"I'll bet you're a devil with the ladies, Handsome."

"You think so?" he said. "Say, whatever happened to Bonnie?"

"Oh, she left town when Stambaugh sold out," Lil said, and turned to the desk. She set her drink down, began searching among the clutter of papers strewn on the desk. There was a cuspidor at the side of the desk, and Reese poured his whisky into it when Lil's back was turned.

Then he said, "What kind of poison did Riordan put in that glass, anyway?"

Lil glanced at him, saw him staring at the empty glass. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Did it taste funny?"

Reese nodded, put the glass on the desk, sank down onto the couch. She stood there watching him, her eyes narrowed and a faint smile of amusement on her lips. Reese rubbed a hand over his eyes.

"What about Stambaugh's address?" he asked, making his voice husky.

"Oh, I can't find it," Lil replied. "But he went to Cheyenne."

"Cheyenne? You sure?"

"Sure. Riordan and Matt Stambaugh are good friends. Riordan had a letter from him not long ago. Stambaugh's living at the Inter-Ocean Hotel in Cheyenne."

Reese simulated a yawn.

Lil said, "Why don't you lie back and rest, Handsome? You're sleepy." She came and put her hands against his shoulders, pushed him down on the couch. She was close enough for Reese to smell her perfume. "That's it. Take it easy."

Reese let himself look drowsy. "Where's Bonnie?" he asked. "Now there's a girl I really liked. Bonnie out there in Cheyenne, too?"

"Yeah," Lil said, not much interested in Stambaugh or Bonnie. "Yeah, she's out there." She removed Reese's hat. "Why don't you forget about her, and get some sleep?"

REESE closed his eyes, and after a moment he felt her start to go through his pockets.

He opened his eyes wide, sat up quickly, and Lil jumped away from him, uttering a startled cry.

Reese grinned wryly, picked his hat up off the floor, rose, and faced the frightened woman.

"Sorry," he said. "But you picked out the wrong man to roll."

Lil recovered, whirled to the door, jerked it open, screamed:

"Pat! Pat, come here!"

Riordan came running, burst into the room with a short length of lead pipe for a weapon. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"I don't know what he's trying to pull," Lil said excitedly. "But he tricked me into telling him that Matt Stambaugh is in Cheyenne."

Riordan stared at Reese, his eyes ugly. "What's the idea?" he growled. "You the Law or something?"

"Never mind what I am," Reese said, eyeing that lead pipe. "I'm looking for Stambaugh and that girl called Bonnie. But I'm sure going to see the sheriff and tell him about you serving drinks laced with knockout drops."

"Get him, Pat!" Lil screamed. "Fix him!"

Riordan rushed, swinging the pipe up, but Reese was ready for him. Seizing a chair, the CPA man flung it against the saloonkeeper's legs. It knocked Riordan off-balance, and Reese caught him with a heavy blow to the back of the head that sprawled him on the floor.

Riordan lay writhing, groaning.

Lil came at Reese, slapping and clawing and kicking. He shouldered her aside and leaped for the door before she could attack him again. He closed it after him, headed for the street, ignoring the customers who were staring at him. When he got outside, he turned toward the railroad station. At the station he wrote out a message for Hank Ball, one of his two aides, addressing it to the Hotel Glennon, Denver, Colorado. It read:

PROCEED IMMEDIATELY CHEYENNE, WYOMING. INVESTIGATE MATT STAMBAUGH. LOCATE GIRL KNOWN AS BONNIE. DUSTY SAME. WILL JOIN YOU.

He signed it, then handed it to the telegrapher and paid the charges. He inquired about a train to Cheyenne, learned that he could catch the westbound at ten in the morning. Leaving the station, he went in search of the sheriff's office to tell Masterson about the attempt to dope and rob him at the Trailside.

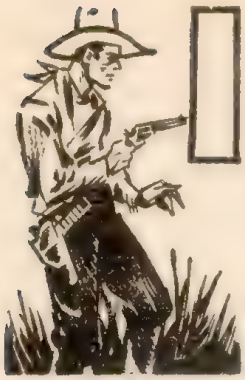
As he passed the saloon, Lil came hurrying from it. She did not notice him, or at least gave no sign that she saw him. She had a slip of paper in her hand, and she was heading toward the station. Reese turned to watch her, suddenly suspicious. Yes, she went into the station.

Like him, she had a message to put on the wire.

Reese would have bet that it was addressed to Matt Stambaugh. It would warn Stambaugh to be on the lookout for trouble. There was nothing Reese could do about it. He could not interfere with a telegraph message any more than he could tamper with the mails.

CHAPTER IV

Rendezvous in Cheyenne



IT WAS another long, tiresome trip for Steve Reese, and he was thankful when the conductor finally came through calling, "Cheyenne! Cheyenne!" It was already dark, a rainy night, and the train was more than two hours late. When it came to a stop, Reese was the first passenger to descend to the station platform. He carried his saddle, bedroll and rifle in a gunny-sack.

A voice said inquiringly, "Reese?"

The CPA man turned automatically, saw that the man who had spoken was a stranger. A big man in a wide-brimmed black hat and a yellow slicker. His face in the thin glow of the station's lamps was rough-hewn, tough, ugly. He came forward, shouldering aside the other passengers who descended from the train, and ignoring their protests at such rough treatment. He scowled at Reese.

"I asked you a question, mister."

"All right, I'll answer it. You've spotted your man."

"You're to come with me."

"Not so fast, friend," Reese said, a warning bell seeming to clang in his mind. "Who are you? Why should I go with you?"

"You want to see Matt Stambaugh, don't you?"

"In due time," the CPA man said. "There's no hurry."

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Two men who had been lounging against the station wall now came forward. They were not as big as this giant who had accosted Reese, but their faces were stamped with the same tough look. Hardcases, the three of them.

Reese realized that he was having a trap of some sort sprung on him, and knew that he had better make some attempt to back out of it. The odds were against him, however, and he was handicapped by the heavy gunny-sack on his left shoulder.

The other two hardcases circled behind the CPA man, one saying, "If he won't come willingly, Jake, let's drag him."

The big man was Jake. He stretched his lips in a mirthless grin. "He'll come," he said mockingly. "Won't you, Mr. Reese?"

Reese had come to Cheyenne, a trip of hundreds of miles, to see Matt Stambaugh, along with the girl called Bonnie, but he was too experienced a hand not to be aware that if he went to see the man now, escorted by these three hardcases, Stambaugh would have him at a disadvantage. And if Stambaugh had a killing to cover up—the killing of Dan Garrett—there was no telling what treatment he would give a man who was searching for the victim. If killing had been done once, it might be done again. If Reese was aware of anything, it was that Matt Stambaugh was a dangerous man.

Reese said, "Well, I don't want to be dragged," and turned as though to accompany the three. Then he swung back and whipped the heavy sack off his shoulder into Jake's face.

The big man reeled back under the impact, yelling a startled oath. Reese grabbed for his right-hand gun, started to turn back toward the other two toughs. But one of them caught him with a heavy blow to the back of the head. Reese was staggered, dazed, and before he recovered he was grabbed by the two smaller toughs. One man got a grip on one of his arms, the other grabbed his other arm. They twisted his arms behind him, and his gun, which he'd gotten only half drawn, fell back into his holster.

Jake swore bitterly, said, "You asked for it, mister!" He drove his fist at Reese's face.

Reese managed to duck so that the punch merely grazed his left cheek instead of slamming him solidly. That served to infuriate Jake even more. He said savagely, "Hold him still!" He cocked his huge fist for another blow. Reese watched that fist as a person might watch a striking snake, knowing it would find its mark this time.

Then a new voice drawled. "You hombres sure play rough, but the odds are a little too much for me to stomach. Gents, this is a

gun in my hand. It's cocked, and I'm a little nervous. Unhand him, pronto!"

Dusty Trail's voice.

AT FIRST glance it was difficult to take Dusty seriously, even when he had a gun in his hand. But upon looking closer, as these three toughs now did, it was seen that his appearance was deceiving. There was something in his manner that showed he could be dangerous. There was a hard core to him, deep inside his roly-poly body, and his fat, cherubic face masked a will of iron. Comical he might seem, with a big black cigar jutting from his round face, but Jake and his companions were far from being amused.

Jake growled, "Keep out of this, mister. It's none of your business!" But his growl was all bluster. He looked uneasily from Dusty to Reese, and began to back slowly away. His partners looked worried.

Reese laughed shortly, harshly. "Keep your gun on them, Dusty," he said. He picked up his gear bag, shouldered it again, then faced Jake. "Crawl back to your boss," he said flatly. "Tell him I'll see him in my own good time. Now clear out!"

The three now sullen hardcases moved away, vanished around the side of the station. Reese and Dusty grinned at each other, and the fat young CPA man said, "Looks like I saved you from a roughing-up, Doc." That was the nickname he and Hank Ball had given Steve Reese. They knew that he was as skillful as a surgeon performing an operation when he worked on a case, and so they called him "Doc" admiringly. Also they declared he looked more like a professional man than a range detective.

Reese nodded, said, "I won't thank you, Dusty. You know how I feel." It was not the first time Dusty had pulled him out of a tight spot. In fact, both Dusty and Hank had saved his life on occasion, as he had saved their lives even oftener. He asked about the long-legged, red-haired Hank.

"Oh, he's busy," Dusty said, putting his gun away and puffing on his stogy. "You know that Don Juan. Show him a petticoat and he's not worth much." It was a good-natured remark, with no malice behind it. Dusty and Hank were forever badgering each other but, though they wouldn't admit it, they liked and respected each other. "He's keeping an eye on the girl, Doc."

"So you located her, eh?"

"Yeah. Without much trouble. And she's a looker."

"But dangerous," Reese said. "How'd you happen to be at the station, Dusty?"

They walked toward the street and Dusty explained that he had been watching Matt Stambaugh, and that the man had gone into a saloon in search of another man named Jake Mardin. "Jake's known as a bad hombre around this town, but Stambaugh is supposed to be a respectable citizen. Well, Doc, I managed to overhear some of their talk and Stambaugh mentioned you. Mardin left him, picked up those two other toughs, and headed for the station. So I tagged after them. What's going on, anyway?"

Reese told him about young Dan Garrett disappearing with Sam Garratt's cattle money, using few words but omitting no important detail. Dusty listened without comment, puffing on his cigar, grasping the situation with his keen mind. Dusty Trail had been a tophand cowpuncher before joining the CPA as a field operative, where he had developed surprising talents for investigation. He never required coaching, and could go it alone if need be.

They reached the Inter-Ocean Hotel where Dusty and Hank had already taken two rooms, one for themselves and one for their chief. They went to Reese's room, and he unburdened himself of his heavy sack. He told himself that he would be glad to get that saddle on a horse. The longer he toted it around, the heavier it seemed to become.

HE TOOK out makings, rolled and lighted a smoke.

"What did you find out about Stambaugh, besides his being a respectable citizen?" he asked Dusty.

"He's pardners in an outfit called the Crown Land and Cattle Company," Dusty said. "With a man named Frank Mason. Mason is out in the northwestern part of Wyoming, founding a big cattle ranch. Stambaugh has an office here, and he's selling

stock in this company he and Mason started. This is the darnedest town, Doc. Everybody is cattle loco. Cattlemen here from all over, lots of them Texans. Wyoming and Montana are the last of the open ranges, and this country is sure to become the biggest stock range ever. Some Texas ranchers are bringing in stock from down there, but most of the cattlemen are buying big herds of Durham strain stock out in Oregon. You should read the Cheyenne newspaper! It tells all about it. Makes a man hanker to go into cattle raising, Doc."

"You couldn't settle down to it," Reese said, grinning. "How about getting back to Stambaugh?"

"Well, he's selling a lot of stock in his Crown company," Dusty went on. "Eastern money—British money, too—is flowing into the country. Plenty of the cattlemen have started companies like the Crown, to take advantage of the situation. There's an Englishman here in Cheyenne now, and he's talking of investing a hundred thousand dollars in a ranch. Stambaugh has about sold him on the Crown."

"Plenty of opportunity for tinhorn promoters to work swindles."

"Yeah. The *Cheyenne Sun* is warning investors to be plumb careful."

"And Stambaugh could be a crook."

Dusty nodded. "I'm beginning to figure so," he said. "After his sending those toughs after you. How'd he know you were on that train?"

Reese said, "He was warned by wire, by the man who bought the saloon Stambaugh used to own in Dodge City. I tangled with that hombre, a tricky son named Riordan. He didn't find out why I'm interested in Stambaugh, but still he sent him a telegram to watch out for me. Stambaugh sent those toughs after me in the hope of forcing me to show my hand."

"You think he got Dan Garrett's seventeen thousand?"

"I'm almost convinced of it."

"Then the young fellow must be dead?"

Reese nodded. "I'm afraid of that," he said. He smoked thoughtfully for a time, then said, "Stambaugh wasn't making much money out of his Dodge City saloon. But

DUSTY TRAIL

all at once he's got the capital to start up as a cattleman. Yeah, it looks as though he got Dan's money."

"And the girl helped him rob the kid?"

"Yeah. She must have roped Dan in."

"Funny thing about her, Doc," Dusty said. "She's working as a waitress in a hash-house. If she was a crook, she would hardly be holding down such a job. Another thing, Hank and I never yet caught her seeing Stambaugh. Still, we've only been in Cheyenne two days."

Reese looked interested. "Maybe she and Stambaugh had a fall-out," he said. "If she did, maybe she'll be sore enough at him to talk. Let's go and see her."

She was a small blonde girl with a trim figure, a strained smile and troubled eyes. She was working tonight, serving two late diners at the counter of the Welcome Café. There was one other man in the restaurant, Hank Ball. Tall, lean, handsome, red-headed, he was reading a newspaper and making a cup of coffee last quite a long time. Whenever Bonnie came by his part of the counter, Hank looked up from his newspaper and smilingly spoke to her.

"He's getting nowhere fast," Dusty Trail

said to Reese. And added gleefully, "For once he's met a girl he can't sweep off her feet."

It was true, Steve Reese saw. Hank couldn't get the girl to stop and talk with him. She kept busy. Now, the two diners served, she carried dirty dishes back to the kitchen. Reese and Dusty stood in the rain and watched through the café's grimy window. Hank finally gave up, left his newspaper on the counter, got down off his stool, and left the place.

CHAPTER V

Two Interviews

HANK'S eyes widened with surprise when he got outside and saw Reese. Then he grabbed his chief's hand in a powerful grip and exclaimed, "You're a sight for sore eyes, Doc!"

"Better sight inside there," Dusty said drily. "Only it's not the kind that goes for redheads. Me, *I* might have a chance with that Bonnie."

"You!" Hank said, all but yelling. "Why, one whiff of that rope you're smoking for a cigar and she'd swoon!" He scowled by the pudgy man, then winked at Reese. The next instant he was solemn. "Dusty's right, Doc. I can't get a word out of her. I've drunk so much coffee in that place that it's coming out of my ears. She's just not interested in men—or maybe she doesn't like my looks. And I can't find anything out about her without getting friendly with her. Seems to me she's worried about something, and worried plenty." He was suddenly curious. "What's going on, anyway?" he demanded. "We finished that case in Denver, then hightailed it up here with only your telegram to go on, and it didn't tell us much."

"Dusty will tell you about it, Hank," Reese said. "I'll go in and have a try at the girl." He smiled faintly. "And not by trying to get romantic with her. Wait here for me, then we'll tackle Matt Stambaugh."

He went inside the café, shook the water off his corduroy coat, removed his hat, and slapped it against his leg. "Bad night." He smiled at the girl.

"It is that," Bonnie replied. "What'll it be, cowboy?"

"Got apple pie?"

"You bet."

"Apple pie and coffee, Bonnie."

She gave him a more interested look when he spoke her name, trying to recall his face and name, then turned to fill a cup at the big coffee urn. Reese took a stool at the counter just as the two men there finished eating. They got off their stools, went out. The girl set his order before him, and he said, "Thanks, Bonnie."

"Where'd you know me, mister?"

"Nowhere."

"What? You joking?"

Reese smiled at her, began eating his pie. Hank had been right. She did seem worried about something. Her eyes now had fright in them.

"No, I'm not joking, Bonnie," he said. "I seldom joke, and never about anything important." Since she was worried and frightened, he realized that she might be shocked into revealing what he wanted to know. It was unkind, even cruel, but the girl—if he was right about her—did not deserve to be treated like a lady. "I learned about you when I started searching for a man who has disappeared," he said. "A man named Dan Garrett."

Bonnie's face paled, her body swayed. Then she said huskily, "I—I don't know anybody named Dan Garrett."

"What happened to him, Bonnie?"

"I told you—"

"Is he dead? Was he killed?"

The girl gripped the edge of the counter with both hands to steady herself. "Leave me alone!" she cried. "I don't know anybody named Garrett!"

Reese eyed her somberly. He was sure now that she was lying, and therefore she had been involved in whatever happened to Dan Garrett. He said, "Murder is an ugly thing, Bonnie. Taking a man's life—for a few thousand dollars. It's on your con-

science. You've had no peace of mind since it happened. I can see that. He was a decent sort, a fine young man. The seventeen thousand dollars you and your friends took off his body belonged to someone else. But the money wasn't as important to the man it belonged to as Dan was. Who killed him, Bonnie? Was it Matt Stambaugh?"

THE girl lost all control of herself. She screamed. She ran back along the counter to the kitchen, and the cook appeared in the doorway as she reached it. He was a Chinese, and he had a meat cleaver in his hand. He said something to Bonnie, then came threateningly toward Reese.

The CPA man looked at the cleaver, a wicked weapon, and decided to beat a hasty retreat. He said, "All right, all right," and got down off his stool. The Chinese followed him to the doorway, stood there glowering after him, chattering in his own tongue and waving the cleaver.

Dusty and Hank were grinning.

Reese grinned back at them and said, "All right, so I turned tail and ran. Let's go and see Matt Stambaugh, Dusty, while Hank keeps an eye on the girl." He turned to the lanky Hank Ball. "I threw a scare into her, and that may make her a bit less standoffish. A frightened person always feels the need of a friend. Make another try at gaining her confidence, bucko."

"It's a pleasure," Hank said.

It wasn't far through the rainy dark to Stambaugh's office, a one-storied plank building with a big sign across its false-front that read:

CROWN LAND & CATTLE CO.
M. STAMBAUGH, MGR.

The blind on the window was drawn almost the whole way, but lamplight showed between the bottom of it and the window sill. Reese and Dusty halted across the street from the unimposing building.

"No use two of us walking into what may be a trap," the CPA field chief said. "You wait here for about five minutes, then come in—with your hand on your gun."

Because of what had happened at the station, he was sure that Stambaugh was not only expecting him but was ready to welcome him in an unpleasant fashion. Crossing the street, Reese opened the door, and paused on the threshold. It was the usual sort of business office, of fair size and containing two desks, a half-dozen chairs, an iron safe, a pot-bellied stove, a large map of Wyoming Territory on one wall, and a mail order house calendar on another.

There was a door to a back room; it was closed. Reese saw so much at a glance, then gave his attention to the man who sat at one of the desks.

He was a bulky man with a florid complexion, well-tailored and freshly barbered. He was smoking a cigar, and he had been writing a letter when the CPA man opened the door. He was eyeing his caller narrowly, sizing him up in wary manner. Like the business executive he was or wanted to appear to be, he tried to cow Reese with his flat stare.

Steve Reese smiled faintly, unabashed. He knew the type. Such a man would be full of bluster and rough with his own employes, if he were a legitimate executive, but he would be harmless where people over whom he wielded no power were concerned. A tough look on a flabby face filled the CPA field chief with no misgivings.

However, if the man whom Reese assumed to be Matt Stambaugh was a confidence man, masquerading as a businessman, he would be shrewd, unscrupulous and dangerous.

"Well, come in, friend," Stambaugh said. "Don't just stand there."

Reese said, with a trace of sarcasm, "Thanks." He stepped into the office, closed the door, then, catching a movement out of the corner of his eye, he started to turn with hand to gun. He was a trifle too slow. The burly Jake Mardin who had been concealed by the door jabbed a gun into Reese's back. The CPA man froze, his eyes chilling but the smile remaining on his lips. It had been a trap as he had anticipated, and he had been wise in not bringing Dusty Trail in with him.

Mardin said harshly, "We've been expecting you, mister." He laughed in ugly fashion. "You're not so smart as you figure."

HE LIFTED Reese's left-hand gun, threw it into the corner, then did the same

with the CPA man's right-hand gun. He gave Reese a violent shove that drove him into the center of the room. Matt Stambaugh, comfortable in his chair and smiling broadly, said, "Sit down, Reese, and we'll have a little talk."

Reese shrugged, pulled a chair to him, straddled it, rested his arms across its back. He looked as much at ease as Stambaugh, despite the gun at his back.

"You sure take precautions, Stambaugh," he said. "What are you afraid of, anyway? A man like you, the head of a business firm, shouldn't be so jumpy."

"I received a telegram about you, Reese."

"Yeah," Reese drawled. "It was signed by a man named Riordan or a woman called Lil. But it didn't tell you much."

"That's right. So suppose you tell me what it failed to say—about you."

"About why I'm interested in you, eh?"

"That, and who you are."

Reese took out makings to build a smoke, needing time to think. He was convinced that Stambaugh was a shrewd crook who had reason to fear the Law and therefore would lower his guard only for someone he considered one of his own kind. Long experience as a CPA investigator and as a St. Louis police detective had given Reese a good understanding of the criminal mind, and he now decided to pose as a shady customer in the hope of gaining Stambaugh's confidence.

He said causally, "Maybe we'd better talk in private, Matt."

Stambaugh showed quick surprise, but said, "Jake's a good friend of mine. My affairs are all aboveboard, so I have nothing to hide from him, or anybody."

"How about that Dodge City affair?"

"What's that?"

"The young Texan—and the seventeen thousand dollars he was carrying.

Stambaugh grabbed the cigar from his mouth. His face turned a lurid red. "Who are you anyway?" he demanded. "What are you?"

Reese smiled faintly, lighted his cigarette.

Behind him, Jake Mardin growled, "A gun-whipping would loosen his tongue, Matt."

Reese said, lifting his voice for Mardin's benefit, "That would get your boss into real trouble. I took precautions of my own before I came here. I'm not dumb. When I come by some information that's worth money, I put it in a safe place." He looked steadily at the uneasy Stambaugh. "I talked to a friend in St. Louis before I started looking for you," he continued. "You ever hear of a gambler named Duke Amberton, Matt?"

"Suppose I have heard of him?"

"I talked to him."

"You're lying. Duke's in prison."

Reese had sent Duke Amberton to prison some years ago, when on the St. Louis Police Force. He said, "He's out now. He's out, and stony broke. Like me, he's looking for a stake. I told him about that seventeen thousand dollars, Matt. He figured like I did, that you might want to share it with us. In return for us keeping quiet about who killed that young Texan named Dan Garrett."

Sweat beaded Stambaugh's heavy face. "Blackmail, eh?" he said thickly. "So that's your game. And if I don't pay up, you'll go to the Law. Or if something happens to you, Duke Amberton will take it up with me." He recovered from his shock, a shrewd look in his eyes. "Nothing doing," he said flatly. "You're barking up the wrong tree, friend. I'm a businessman, not a tinhorn."

CHAPTER VI

Dan Is Alive!

REESE was surprised by the abrupt change in Stambaugh's manner. It seemed that somehow the man knew that he was bluffing. He said, "So you're not afraid of a killer charge?"

"That's it, friend."

"The Law is mighty anxious to know who did for young Garrett."

"And you think you know."

"Yeah," Reese drawled, though none too sure of himself. "You."

Stambaugh gave a bark of laughter. "Just

where was this young Garrett killed?" he asked.

"In or near Dodge City."

"When?"

"About three months ago."

Stambaugh found that his cigar had gone out. He struck a match, puffed the cigar alight. And said blandly, "You had me going for a minute, Reese. Especially with your talk of St. Louis. But now I savvy you're lying. If anybody named Garrett was killed in or around Dodge City three months ago, I would have heard about it. I didn't hear of it. I think, friend, you know what you can do—so far as I'm concerned."

Reese was puzzled, at least partially. He couldn't understand why Stambaugh had been upset by the mention of St. Louis, and then had got over it when he, Reese, suggested that Dan Garrett had been killed at Dodge City, the scene of the Texan's disappearance. He tried once more, saying, "The body wasn't found until recently, Matt."

"At Dodge."

"That's it."

Stambaugh shook his head, denying that. "You're playing the wrong cards," he said. "You didn't stack your deck right."

Reese thought a moment, then said, "So you didn't kill Garrett when you robbed him of his seventeen thousand?"

"Jake," said Stambaugh, "let's find out what this hombre is trying to pull."

Jake Mardin said, "It'll be a pleasure," and aimed a blow of his gun at the base of Reese's skull. But the blow missed, throwing him off-balance, for the CPA man had flung himself sideward off his chair. Holding onto the chair, Reese whirled on Mardin before the hardcase recovered entirely.

He swung the chair in a wide arc. Mardin saw it coming, and ducked. But the chair crashed down upon his bowed neck with terrific force. Reese let loose of it as Mardin collapsed to the floor. He leaped toward the corner where his guns had been thrown, grabbed them up, then pivoted to throw down on the two men. Mardin was writhing on the floor, struggling to rise. But Stambaugh suddenly knocked the lamp off his desk with a sweep of his arm.

The lamp crashed to the floor, plunged the room into utter darkness. The door to the back room slammed after Stambaugh. Reese started after him, then it occurred to him that well over five minutes had passed since he had entered the office and that Dusty Trail hadn't put in an appearance. Dusty must be in trouble outside!

He holstered his left-hand gun, leaped for the door, jerked it open. Three men were in a violent struggle just outside, one of them the roly-poly Dusty. The other two were the tough hands who had been at the railroad station with Jake Mardin. But, despite their toughness, they had their hands full trying to subdue the pudgy CPA man. One was sent reeling towards Reese by a violent body punch, and the CPA field chief felled him with a jab to the chin. Dusty bowled the second hardcase over with a blow to the jaw, then turned to grin at Reese.

"They were waiting in that alley yonder," he explained. "They jumped me from behind when I reached the door. What'll we do with them, Doc?"

"Nothing," Reese said. "Let's go to the hotel."

DUSTY lighted up a stogie as they walked away from the two downed toughs. The rain was only a light drizzle now. Dusty said, once his cigar was burning, "One of those hombres knew me from somewhere, Doc. When they jumped me, he said something about me being a no-good range detective from Texas. Looks like we can't fool them any more about what we are."

"It doesn't matter, I guess," Reese told him. "I found out something. Matt Stambaugh didn't kill Dan Garrett when he robbed him."

"Where is Garrett, if he's alive?"

"I don't know. But I happened to mention St. Louis, and for some reason I can't savvy it made Stambaugh excited."

"Now what would a Texas cowboy be doing in a big town like St. Louis?"

"I don't know that either," Steve Reese replied, genuinely puzzled. "Still, it's something to know that the young fellow wasn't killed as well as robbed. . . ."

Reese was writing a report for his chief,

Colonel Beauvine, when Hank Ball came to his room at the Inter-Ocean Hotel. Dusty Trail had turned in, in the room he shared with the lanky redhead. Hank looked excited, and Reese said, "Looks as though you got somewhere with Bonnie."

Hank grinned. "Not like I figured on," he said. "I was sitting at the counter trying to coax Bonnie into letting me walk her home when the restaurant closed when Stambaugh came in and called her to a table at the back of the room. They talked a long time, argued. The girl got hysterical She mentioned Dan Garrett a couple of times, and said something about knowing where he is."

"So he *is* alive," Reese drawled.

"Seems like it," Hank continued. "Stambaugh got excited, grabbed her by the arm, tried to make her tell where Garrett is. They forgot about me, Doc. Or maybe they figured me for a dumb cowhand who didn't savvy what they were talking about. Anyway, Stambaugh was wild to find out Dan Garrett's whereabouts. Bonnie was crying and yelling, all scared and worked up. She said Garrett was here in Cheyenne ten days ago. He's made Bonnie tell him where some hombre named Mike Lonergan was."

"Lonergan? We know him."

"Yeah," Hank said. "A Texas badman. Well, Bonnie admitted to Stambaugh that Dan Garrett forced her to tell where Lonergan is. It's a loco game of hide-and-seek, Doc—everybody hunting somebody else."

"I've an idea why Dan is hunting Mike Lonergan," Reese said. "That hardcase must have been one of the crowd that robbed him."

Hank nodded. "Bonnie screamed at Stambaugh that she hadn't told him about Dan being in Cheyenne because she was sick of him and his crookedness. Stambaugh looked like he would slap her, but that Chinese cook was hanging around—with a butcher knife in his hand."

"Did you hear the girl say where Mike Lonergan is?"

"Yeah. In Baker City, Oregon, buying cattle for the ranch Stambaugh and his pardner are starting in western Wyoming."

"And Dan went there after him?"

"So Bonnie told Stambaugh," Hank said. "And Stambaugh sort of laughed about it. I guess he figures that Lonergan can take care of Dan Garrett. Or maybe he figures that Lonergan has already left Baker City and is on the trail with the cattle he bought. It ended up with Stambaugh telling Bonnie that she was to be ready to take the westbound train in the morning, that he was taking her on a trip out to the Crown Land and Cattle Company's new ranch. She argued with him that she didn't want to go. I left to come report to you while they were still arguing."

Reese nodded. "You didn't waste your time, Hank," he said. "We know for certain now that Dan Garrett was alive ten days ago and that he's looking for a bad hombre named Mike Lonergan. We don't know where he's been since he disappeared from Dodge City until he showed up here in Cheyenne, but that's not important at the moment. Our job now is to locate him before he overtakes Lonergan—and really gets himself killed."

"We'll go to Baker City, eh?"

"Yeah," Reese said. "We'll take the morning train, too."

IN THE morning the three CPA men reached the station just before train time. Matt Stambaugh was already there, a bland look on his florid face as he chatted with the three people who were making the trip with him. One of the three was Bonnie. She was paying no attention to Stambaugh, or to anyone. Her face was pale, there was a strained look about her mouth, and deep shadows beneath her eyes. Bonnie had the look of being forced to do something against her will.

Steve Reese understood why Stambaugh was taking her on the trip. He was afraid to leave her out of his sight now that he knew that others were interested in the Garrett robbery and disappearance, for the girl might talk out of turn. Matt Stambaugh was no fool, and he took no chances.

The other people with Stambaugh, a handsome young man and a beautiful young woman, interested Reese.

Dusty Trail said, low-voiced, "That's the Englishman, Keith, I was telling you about, Doc. He's repping for some big London bankers, with a small fortune deposited to his account at the Cheyenne bank. My idea

is that Stambaugh is taking him out to see that ranch his pardner, Frank Mason, is starting on Squaw Creek."

"The girl is Keith's sister," Hank Ball put in, always having an eye for the ladies. "A looker."

Stambaugh had seen Reese and his aides arrive, but his cheerful expression hadn't so much as wavered. He looked as though it didn't interest him at all that Reese and his companions were leaving Cheyenne on the same train that he was taking. There was a reason for the burly man's unconcern. Jake Mardin and his two toughs were standing by, hands to guns as they sullenly watched Reese, none of them knowing, as yet, that the three men were CPA men.

At the approach of the train, people along the station platform reached for their luggage and some said noisy good-bys to friends seeing them off. Reese shouldered his gunny-sack.

Dusty and Hank picked up their saddles, with bedrolls tied to them and rifles in the saddle-scabbards.

Jake Mardin and his partners lifted the same sort of gear, which surprised the CPA field chief. Reese had expected the hardcased trio to attempt to keep him and his men from boarding the train.

He now suspected that Stambaugh had given them a different mission—to hunt down Dan Garrett.

There was the usual confusion while some people left the coaches and others entered them. Reese and his lieutenants boarded the rear coach, and when they were settling themselves, stowing their gear up on the luggage racks and seating themselves comfortably, Stambaugh and his party entered the same coach and took seats at its front end.

Jake Mardin and his companions chose a forward coach.

By the time the train got under way Stambaugh, with the dazed-looking Bonnie beside him, sat facing Ronald Keith and his sister. Stambaugh never stopped talking, and occasionally his too hearty laughter rang out. But once his gaze touched Reese, and the CPA man saw a look of anger and hatred in the man's eyes.

CHAPTER VII

Rails Meet

CATTLEMEN had come aboard, on their way to Oregon to buy cattle and horses, and their talk was of the great new range that was Wyoming Territory. Some Mormons were in the coach, quiet folk bound for Salt Lake City. The conductor came through, punching tickets. When he reached Reese, the CPA field chief said, "I want to pay my way to the station where those people are getting off." He indicated the Stambaugh party.

"That'll be Hanlon Junction," the trainman said, and told him the fare.

Reese said, "My partners are going to the station nearest Baker City, Oregon. What will that be?"

"Kelton, Utah."

Reese paid for the tickets for Dusty and Hank, and the two CPA men eyed their chief curiously when the conductor moved on. Reese said, "I want you buckaroos to take the Baker City stage at Kelton, and try to pick up Dan Garrett's trail there. If Lonergan was already on the trail with his herd when Dan got to Baker City, he'll already be gone by the time you get there. If he caught Lonergan there— Well, either he killed Mike Lonergan or Lonergan killed him. Anyway, you cut his sign and end up at the ranch on Squaw Creek."

"You're going there?" Hank asked. "It'll be asking for trouble, Doc."

"I've got to," Reese said. "Dan may be moving faster than we know, and may turn up at the Squaw Creek ranch at any time. If he's still alive, I want to keep him alive. And one thing is certain, both Stambaugh and Lonergan will try to kill him on sight—providing we're not close enough to stop them."

Dusty said, "What do you think he's after, Doc? He's been among the missing for three months, then all of a sudden he turns up—ten days ago, if the girl told the truth—and

is on the trail of the people who robbed him. He passed up Stambaugh there in Cheyenne, maybe because he didn't find out yet that Stambaugh was in cahoots with Lonergan. Bonnie didn't tip him off. You think he'll kill Lonergan for revenge, if he gets the chance, or just get the drop on him and take back what money he finds on Lonergan?"

"He'll try to overcome that hardcase without killing him," Reese said. "Or so it seems to me. He'll want to force Lonergan to name the others. As for getting his money back—well, I don't know. Lonergan's kind can run through that sort of money in a hurry. Easy come, easy go. Besides, Lonergan probably did the job for a flat sum—maybe for five hundred dollars or some such amount. Matt Stambaugh is too shrewd to have dealt the others in as full partners. If he planned the job, then he must have kept most of the loot for himself."

"It's queer Dan didn't make Bonnie name Lonergan's *compadres,*" Hank Ball said. "If she had told him about Matt Stambaugh, he would have a better chance of getting some of his money back."

"A young fellow like Dan Garrett hasn't it in him to get tough with a woman—even a shady lady like that Bonnie," Reese said. "If he gets any of his money back, it won't be through his own efforts. It's up to us to collect it for him, and when we try it there's sure to be trouble." He smiled faintly. "We'll force some kind of a pay-off," he added. "But it might be in lead."

Dusty and Hank went to the smoking-car that evening, and Reese left his seat to go to the rear platform. The sun was down. Dusk was a purplish haze over the seemingly endless prairie. The railroad track ran straight as a die, for mile after mile. There was grass here for tens of thousands of cattle, and Steve Reese knew that they would come. There was little open range left in Texas, and Texas cattlemen were spreading out over all the West. Wyoming was destined to become a great stock range.

REESE was alone on the platform for but a minute or two. Then the door opened, and the Keith girl stepped from the coach. She was tall, slender, in her middle twenties. Bonnie was pretty, glaringly attractive. This young woman's beauty was subdued, but far more real. A wealth of soft brown hair, gold-flecked brown eyes, a creamy complexion, full red lips.

There were times when a bachelor felt that his life was less than complete, and this was such an occasion for Steve Reese. He was staring, and the girl became aware of it. She held her head high as she moved to one side of the platform. Proud, Reese thought. Sort of high and mighty. Her manner was a challenge. One of his rare smiles came. He took out tobacco sack and papers, moved toward her.

"Stuffy inside, Miss Keith," he said. "Nicer out here."

She ignored him.

"I said—"

"Yes, I heard. May I remind you that we haven't been introduced?"

"When in Rome, somebody once said, do as the Romans do."

She looked at him, surprised. "Really?" she said, smiling. "I didn't know that Westerners were given to quoting classical references. You amaze me, sir. Very well, when in the West I'll do as the Westerners do. I'll forego formalities. Yes, it is stuffy inside and nicer out here."

They smiled at each other, and he introduced himself.

Reese was deftly rolling a cigarette, and the English girl watched the operation with something like fascination.

"That's very clever, Mr. Reese," she said. "I've never seen anyone do it at home, in England." She watched him light a match with his thumbnail and puff the cigarette alight. "Are you a cattleman, Mr. Reese?"

"I'm interested in cattle and cattlemen."

"Oh?"

He saw that she was genuinely curious about him, but he did not enlighten her as to what he actually was. He had long ago learned that most people froze up, so to speak, upon learning that he was an investigator.

The girl said, "You wouldn't be one of those Western badmen I've heard so much about?" She was looking at his guns.

Reese laughed. "No, I'm not a badman,"

he told her. "But I've known a lot of them. And believe me, they're not as bad as you've probably heard."

She seemed eager. "Tell me about them. Please."

He sobered. He wanted to tell her about Matt Stambaugh, to warn her so that she and her brother would be on guard against the man. But it was always difficult to make people believe that someone was a crook unless there were concrete evidence to back up the charge.

The door opened before he could speak, and someone stepped out onto the platform. Reese's back was to door, and so he had no awareness of danger until he saw alarm widen the girl's eyes as she looked at the person behind him. Her lips parted to cry out a warning, but no sound came from her throat. Reese turned then, but too slowly and too late. It was Jake Mardin who had come from the coach, and the burly hardcase had come to the platform for a deadly purpose.

His right arm was flung high as he leaped at Reese, and a wicked grin was on his ugly face. His arm came down, and Reese had only a glimpse of the gun in the tough's hand. A glimpse just before the barrel clubbed him upon the head. His hat did little to cushion the blow, and the CPA man fell to his knees with pain exploding in his brain.

Dimly he heard the English girl's scream, and Mardin's harsh laughter. Then the gun hit him again, this time on the left temple. He fell against the iron guard rail, numbed by pain and half-blinded.

Mardin's big hands grabbed him, lifted him. He was heaved over the guard rail, and then he was falling. He somersaulted loosely going down, and it seemed that he fell from a great height. Then he landed on the stone ballast beside the track, jarred to the core of him by the impact. He rolled from the roadbed and lay sprawled face down, unconscious. . . .

IT WAS full dark when Reese regained consciousness, and so he had no idea of how long he had been out. He forced himself into a sitting position, and held his head in his hands. His head throbbed with pain. There was blood on his face from a gash on his temple. He became aware of the quiet finally, and realized with a shock of understandable alarm that the train had gone on, had left him stranded in the middle of nowhere.

He could not understand that. The Keith girl should have given the alarm, and the train should have come to a stop and then backed up. No, Jake Mardin would have kept her from telling anyone. He would have kept her on the platform as long as possible, by force. And the racket of the train's wheels must have kept her screams from being heard

THEY TAKE A CHANCE

FEW SPECTATORS at big-time rodeo shows realize the consistent danger faced by rodeo clowns while they do their tricks to amuse the onlookers.

Everyone is concerned with the bronco busters, steer wrestlers and trick riders—all of whom risk severe injury. That funny fellow who ducks into the barrel, though—sometimes he's not fast enough in getting away from a wild bull. Other dangers beset him in the arena, too.

The casualty list among clowns is as great as that of any other class of rodeo performer. So don't spare your applause or sympathy next time you see the harlequins stepping out to the tanbark.

—William Carter

inside the coach. She had screamed. Reese was sure he had heard her cry out as he had gone down under Mardin's blows.

He rose finally, discovered that he was able to walk without too much pain. He had broken no bones in his fall. He used his neckscarf to wipe the blood from his face. He found his hat, picked it up, reshaped it, carefully placed it on his aching head.

Anger began to build up in him, with hatred feeding it. Hatred for Jake Mardin, and for the man who gave Mardin his orders —Matt Stambaugh. The brutality of Mardin's attack was proof that Stambaugh would stop at nothing to protect himself. It proved too, if Reese had any doubts, that Dan Garret's life was in danger.

Climbing to the roadbed, Reese began to walk west along the track. There was a moon, and its light made the going easier but showed him nothing but the railroad track extending on and on through the empty country. The gunwhipping had sapped his strength, and after perhaps a mile he halted and sank to one of the iron rails. He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and wondered how far he would have to hoof it to reach the nearest station. He no longer had any hope that the train would come backing up for him. It was too long gone, too far on its way.

He started out again, and every step jarred pain through his battered head. He peered ahead, but saw no lights. An hour of walking in his high-heeled boots tired him, another hour had him limping. He halted again to rest, then heard a drumming of hoofs in the distance. He was about to draw one of his guns and fire three shots into the air, the customary signal for help, when he realized that the horses—two of them by the sound—were coming directly toward him.

Shortly he saw a rider leading a spare horse coming toward him along the track. A yell leaped to his lips, and at once an answering shout came.

"Doc! That you, Doc?"

Reese recognized Hank Ball's voice.

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CHAPTER VIII

Back in the Saddle

LANKY red-headed Hank reined in before Reese, and dismounted. His relief was plain on his face. "Thought I'd find you dead, or at least bad hurt," he said. "Dusty and I didn't think anything was wrong when we came back from the smoking-car and found you gone from your seat. It wasn't until the train stopped at Hanlon's Junction that the Keith girl came running in from the observation platform, screaming that somebody had been murdered. She claimed that a crazy man had beat you over the head with his gun and dumped you off the train. From her description, Dusty and I figured it was Jake Mardin. He'd kept the girl out there until the train stopped at the Junction, then he had jumped off the platform and disappeared."

Reese nodded. "I thought he'd hold her out there until the train was miles from here. He didn't hurt her?"

"Roughed her up a little when she tried to get away from him," Hank said. "Dusty and I tried to get the conductor to come back and pick you up, but he claimed there's a westbound freight running behind him and he was scared he'd back into a collision. So I told Dusty to stay on the train. I got my saddle and yours off it, hired a couple of horses, and came riding out to look for you."

"I'm glad you did," Reese said. "I'm in no shape to hoof it far. How far is it to Hanlon's Junction?"

"About twelve miles, I reckon."

"The Stambaugh party got off the train there?"

"Yeah. And like I said, Jake Mardin."

"Mardin probably hid out nearby until the train was ready to go on," Reese said, "then climbed aboard as it pulled out. Stambaugh gave him orders to get rid of me, and I've a hunch he gave him orders to stay on Dan Garrett's trail. Mardin and his two hard-

cased partners. Dusty did the right thing by staying on the train, but the odds and three to one against him—if those toughs should decide to do away with him."

"Don't worry about Dusty, Doc," Hank said. "He'll be ready for trouble."

"Yeah. But you better stay over at the Junction and take the next westbound through here. Maybe you can catch up with him at Kelton, Utah."

"What about you, Doc?"

"I'm going after Matt Stambaugh," Reese said, his voice rough with his hatred for the man.

They mounted and struck out toward Hanlon's Junction. For Steve Reese it was a relief to get back in the saddle again. It was long after midnight when they reached the Junction which consisted of a station that was merely a one-room shack and a roadhouse that was a combination general store, saloon, restaurant and hotel. The roadhouse was a sizable two-storied building with a barn around back, and it was here that Hank had got the horses.

A fat, bald man named Ed Hanlon operated the place and he was waiting for Hank Ball to return the horses. The saloon part of his business establishment was lighted when the two CPA men dismounted before the building.

Hanlon said from the doorway, "Looks like you found your friend alive, bucko."

Hank grinned. "He's got more lives than a cat," he said. "Doc, shake hands with Ed Hanlon. Ed, Steve Reese."

The two shook hands, then they all went inside and Hanlon gave the CPA men drinks on the house. He was obviously curious about Reese's having been gunwhipped and thrown off the train, and he said, "That Jake Mardin must be a pretty tough hombre."

"He is that," Reese admitted. "And, too, he caught me off guard."

"I've been watching for him, but he ain't showed himself around here."

"I've a hunch he climbed back onto the train when it pulled out."

"Could be," Hanlon said. "You gents want a room for tonight?"

Reese said, "My partner does. But I'm going on. I'd like to buy that roan horse of yours, Ed. I'm headed for the same place those other passengers from the train are going—the Squaw Creek country. I take it that they've gone on."

"Yeah. By stage. There's a stage-coach from Dalton that meets the train whenever the driver takes a notion to make the trip."

"How far to Dalton?"

"About forty miles."

"Well, I'll get started," Reese said. "Put a price on the roan, friend. . . ."

IT WAS mid-morning when Steve Reese rode into Dalton, a small mining town in a range of rocky hills. He put his horse up at a livery stable at the edge of town, noticed an old Concord coach standing beside the frame building and asked the hostler, "That the stage-coach that runs between here and the Junction?"

"Yep. It makes the trip once a week, sometimes twice."

"You notice it come in its last trip?"

"Sure," the hostler said. He was a gray-bearded old-timer. "Me, I handled the ribbons. Used to be a driver for Wells Fargo. Why, mister?"

"I'm trying to overtake the people you brought in from Hanlon's Junction."

"Two men and two fancy-looking women?"

"Yes. Do you know if they're still in Dalton?"

"You won't find them here," the hostler said. "A rancher from up in the Squaw Creek country was here to meet them with a buckboard and team. He loaded them up, and they left town in a hurry. Rancher named Mason."

"How far to Squaw Creek?"

"About fifty miles, due north."

Reese nodded, said, "Thanks," and went in search of an eating place. After satisfying his hunger, he went to the town's one hotel and took a room. He stripped down, washed, shaved, then stretched out on the bed. He allowed himself four hours of sleep, then dressed and went downstairs. He ate an early supper, and after eating returned to the livery stable for his now rested horse.

Ten minutes later he rode out of Dalton.

There was a road through the hills, to outlying diggings, but once he gained the open country again Reese had only the tracks of Rancher Mason's buckboard and team to follow.

He traveled at an easy lope across a seemingly endless sea of grass. As important as the graze was a water supply, as a Texan well knew, and Reese frequently had to ford fine clearwater streams fringed with trees and brush. This was fine cattle country, as good if not better than the best in Texas. Late in the afternoon Reese topped a rise and saw a great trail herd strung out for more than a mile. Two wagons traveled with the herd, and a big cavvy of horses. As the CPA man drew close, he called to one of the trail hands.

"Where's your outfit from, friend?"

"Oregon!" the rider shouted back. "And a long, hard trail it was!"

"Soon on your own range, eh?"

"Good as. Two more days of trail driving."

Reese waved and swung around the drag of the herd, lifted his roan to a lope again. Except for the trail herd, it was empty country. He saw no ranches, no settler places.

He was still heading north at sundown. As darkness closed in, he halted and dismounted to rest his horse and to have a smoke. Then he rode on until midnight when, coming upon a sizable creek, he judged that he had covered nearly fifty miles and was now in the Squaw Creek country.

He dismounted, off-saddled his horse, watered it, staked it out. The night was chill enough for a campfire, but it was more to dispel a feeling of loneliness rather than for warmth that Reese gathered brush and got a blaze going. He sat by it, smoking a cigarette, none too easy in his mind when he thought of Dan Garrett who was attempting to track down Mike Lonergan, and of Dusty Trail who was on his way to Oregon in search of Dan by the same train and possibly by the same stage-coach that had carried Jake Mardin and his hardcase partners.

It wasn't often that Steve Reese doubted one of his own decisions once it was acted upon, but now, as he sat by his lonely fire and later lay in his blankets, he wondered if he had made the right decision in quitting Dan Garrett's trail to follow Matt Stambaugh. He had acted on a hunch that he would locate the youth by going to the Squaw Creek country. If his hunch was right, it meant that Dan had missed Lonergan at Baker City and was trailing him toward Wyoming. Reese's last thought before falling alseep was that it was a tricky sort of hunch to trust. . . .

THE man prodded Reese with the toe of his boot, and growled, "Come on, you! Wake up!" There were two of them, and they'd Injunned up on the CPA man's camp after glimpsing his fire from afar. They had left their horses ground-hitched some distance away. Reese woke to see them standing over him, their guns boring at him. He sat up, held his hands shoulder high.

One was gaunt of body, bearded, and lank of face. The other was short, stocky. The gaunt man said sourly, "We warned you Triangle D hands that this range belongs to the Crown. What does it take to make your outfit savvy that?"

Reese slowly rose. These men were Crown riders, and the Crown was Stambaugh's and Mason's outfit. They seemed like ordinary cowhands, but appearances could be deceiving; they might be some more gunmen in Matt Stambaugh's private hire. The stocky man moved around behind Reese and lifted the CPA man's .38 Colts from their holsters. Reese lowered his hands.

"You've got me wrong," he said. "I don't know any Triangle D outfit."

"He's lying, Mac," the stocky man growled. "Don't let him fool you."

"Take it easy, Reb. What is your outfit, stranger?"

"I've got no outfit around these parts."

"A drifter, eh? A saddle tramp?"

Reese shrugged, remained silent.

Mac eyed him suspiciously, then said, "We'll have the boss take a look at you," making his slow decision.

It was about three miles to the Crown cow camp, and Mac whistled in signal as they approached it. An answering whistle sounded, then a man threw some brush on the embers of the campfire. As the fire flared

up, Steve Reese saw a chuckwagon, a bunch of horses in a rope corral, and four men bedded down near the fire. The man standing by the fire was a tall, ruggedly handsome man in his early thirties. He gazed steadily at Reese, his gray eyes as sharp and probing as the CPA field chief's brown ones. His manner was direct, not evasive, and at first glance he was not Reese's idea of the sort of man who would be partners with a crook like Matt Stambaugh. Still, appearances were often deceptive.

"We caught this hombre camped on our range, Boss," Mac said. "We took him for a Triangle D hand, but he claims he's a saddle tramp."

"He could be telling the truth," Frank Mason said, proving that he was, at the moment at least, a fair-minded person. "What's your name, friend?"

"Steve Reese."

"From where?"

"Texas."

"Yeah? What part of Texas?"

"Austin."

"What outfits have you ridden for?"

Reese shrugged. "I didn't say that I'd ridden for any Texas outfits. But I know plenty of Texas ranchers." He named a half dozen; ranchers who were members of the CPA. "First time I ever knew a man needed references to ride open range, though," he added.

Mason laughed easily. "All right, boys," he said to Mac and Reb. "Give him his guns. I'll take his word for it that he's not a Triangle D hand. I'm pretty sure that crowd pulled out. But prowl around some more, and make sure."

The two riders turned away. Reese dismounted and went to the fire. He hunkered down, took out makings.

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CHAPTER IX

The Devil's Trail Herd

FRANK MASON, on the opposite side of the fire, kept studying the CPA man. Reese in turn tried to weigh the rancher in the balance of his mind, wondering if he could be, despite his aboveboard appearance, cast in Matt Stambaugh's crooked mold.

"So you're from Texas," Mason said, after a time. "I am, too—from the Brazos River country. I've known a lot of saddle tramps in my time. You don't have quite the look. I'd hate to have it turn out that the Triangle D is planning to pull something, and that you're a spy for that outfit. The Triangle D came after I was here, but still tried to bluff me off this Squaw Creek range. I don't bluff easy. I don't fool easy, either. What'd you say you're doing around these parts?"

"Didn't say. For a Texan, you sure break the rules and ask a heap of questions. Down in Texas it's not polite to ask a man all about himself."

"On my range I make the rules, friend."

"You sure of that?"

"Meaning what?"

Reese shrugged. "I heard that your partner Matt Stambaugh is the big boss of the Crown Land and Cattle Company."

"You heard right. But I boss the ranch—when it gets to be a ranch."

"Your herd due soon?"

"You know a lot about my business, Reese. And you're asking a heap of questions yourself. But I'll answer them. I've got nothing to hide. Yeah, I expect the herd soon—any day now. Why?"

"A good man, Mike Lonergan? A good trail boss, I mean."

Mason looked surprised. "Lonergan?" he said. "The only Mike Lonergan I ever heard of was a no-good down in Texas. My trail boss is Mickey Long."

Reese smiled thinly. "Mickey Long?" he

said. "He didn't show much imagination when he changed his name from Mike Lonergan." He saw an angry scowl gather on Mason's face. "Who hired this trail boss of yours?"

"My pardner."

"You ever seen him?"

"Long? No."

"Maybe you'd better take a look at him as soon as you can," Reese said, rising. "Well, I guess I'll turn in—for the second time tonight." He started to turn away, but swung back as Mason also stood up. "I'll be riding west off your range in the morning."

"Suit yourself," Mason said, looking puzzled. . . .

Steve Reese ate breakfast with Frank Mason and the six men in his ranch-founding crew, then saddled his roan bronc. Mason was giving his men their working orders for the day, and said, "Reese, wait a minute. I'll ride with you."

The CPA field chief smiled faintly. He had aroused the rancher's curiosity.

It was sunup when they rode out, west along Squaw Creek. Topping a rise, they sighted the ranch headquarters a few hundred yards on the north side of the stream. Reese said, "Mason, you're doing yourself proud."

That was true. Only one building was completed, the ranchhouse, but it was a large two-storied loghouse with a stone foundation and a roofed porch across the front of the first flor. It looked as though it would stand a hundred years. The foundation of a bunkhouse had been laid, and its walls were beginning to rise. Stone had been gathered for the foundation of a barn, its site already staked out. The Crown Ranch would have an imposing headquarters.

"No real need for such a big house," Mason said. "But my pardner wanted it. Stambaugh said we needed to show off a little to people who might have money to invest in a company like the Crown."

"People like the young Englishman," said Reese.

"So you know about Keith."

"I understand that he plans to invest a hundred thousand dollars."

Mason nodded. "Once he's convinced that Matt and I are on the level. His investment would mean a lot to us. We could stock this range with eight, ten thousand more head of cattle, stock it as it should be stocked. He wants to see our first herd. That's why I'm riding out this way now, hoping to spot it. We got the house built and furnished just in time. Keith's sister and Matt's niece are visiting us. I got a half-breed woman to cook for them. Well, let's mosey along."

THEY rode on, and Reese said casually, "Known Stambaugh long?"

Mason gave him a sharp, searching look. "Met him in Cheyenne about three months ago, when I was looking for somebody with money to go pardners with me. I had ten thousand dollars. Not enough for the kind of ranch I wanted to start. Matt had some money, and he came up with the idea of founding a company and selling stock. So we made a deal, and I came out here to found the ranch while he tried to sell stock. Why? What's your interest in him?"

Reese merely shrugged.

"Damn, but you're a hard man to figure!" Mason growled.

"How so?"

"I have the feeling that you mean trouble for me, but I can't see how."

"I'll give you my word," Reese said gravely, "any trouble that you have won't be of my making."

He saw that that, too, mystified Frank Mason. He had an impulse to confide in the man, but a slight doubt lingered. Mason might not know that Matt Stambaugh was something other than an honest businessman; he might be in cahoots with Stambaugh in his crookedness. Reese was inclined to think otherwise, but he wasn't convinced entirely. And so he decided to wait until the cowman had proved himself, one way or another.

They rode at a lope across the vast sweep of undulating prairie, aiming for some wooded hills in the west. They sighted a big wagon drawn by a six-horse team coming down from the hills, and Mason explained that he had a camp up in the timber, cutting logs for his buildings. He had hired the workmen in Dalton. The wagon was loaded

with logs, and bound for the ranch headquarters.

They stopped at the lumber camp at noon and ate their mid-day meal with the half dozen men there. Riding on then, they came to a stretch of rough country and saw far across it a red plume of dust rising against the blue of the sky. The dust cloud was some miles distant, and it took the two men nearly an hour of riding to meet up with the trail herd that raised it. The herd was strung out

A COWBOY'S BEEF

They call me a cowpoke, a ranny, a hand,
Buscadero, vaquero, and prod—
They say I'm a pilgrim, a wrangler, a tramp,
A rannihan, hazer and rod.

They bore me with names plain and fancy,
So here, my good folks, is my hymn—
I'll propose to the very first filly
Who'll just up and call me her Jim.

—Pecos Pete

for nearly a mile, and the outfit's chuckwagon was traveling well ahead of it.

Reese and Mason rode up to the wagon, and its driver reined in his team.

"What outfit's this?" Mason asked.

"The Nolan brothers' K T."

"See anything of the Crown herd along the way?"

"Heading for Squaw Creek?"

"That's the one."

"It's ten, twelve mlies behind us," the driver said. "The boss of it rode into our camp one night after we got through the lava beds. A hombre named Mickey Long."

Mason nodded, said, "Thanks," and rode on with Steve Reese. They traveled all afternoon without sighting the Crown herd, however, which meant that it was much farther than ten or twelve miles behind the K T herd.

It was hazy dusk when they sighted it, the cattle already on a bedground and the night herders riding a slow circle about them. The rest of the trail crew were at supper, the chuckwagon standing near a shallow creek. There were twenty men in the crew, not counting the Negro cook. They were a rough, tough bunch of riders.

Most trail outfits were friendly toward strangers met along the way, but these men merely stared at Reese and Mason. None had a word or a nod of greeting. One man, leaning against a rear wheel of the chuckwagon, caught Reese's eye. A burly man with a couple of weeks' growth of rust-red stubble on his heavy face. The CPA man had known him—by sight and by reputation—back in Texas. Mike Lonergan, rustler, horse-thief, bank robber, killer.

He said, "Frank, there's your trail boss."

MASON looked annoyed. Reese was beginning to get under his skin. But he reined in facing the burly man, and asked, "You the boss of this outfit?"

"That's right. Mickey Long is the name."

"I'm Frank Mason, Matt Stambaugh's pardner."

"Your showing up must mean that we're close to Squaw Creek."

"Another three days of trailing, and you'll be there."

The man calling himself Mickey Long nodded. He held a tin cup, and now drank the last of the coffee it held. "Just an easy hop, skip and jump after what this herd has come through," he said. "But we didn't do too bad. Lost less than a hundred head."

"No trouble at all on the trail?" Reese asked.

The trail boss tossed his cup into the cook's dishpan, then took out makings. He eyed Reese frowningly while rolling a cigarette. "I said we lost some cattle," he said. "That's trouble. It sure ain't fun, trailing through the lava beds." He looked back at Mason. "This hombre one of your riders?"

The CPA man said hastily, "Reese is the name."

"Yeah? Don't I know you from somewhere?"

A warning sounded in Steve Reese's mind.

This was no time to make trouble with Mike Lonergan, when he had a whole crew of tough hands to side him. He said easily, "I'm just up from Texas."

"Texas, eh?" Lonergan said. "Never been there. I'm an Oregon man, myself. Well, step down and get some chuck. There ought to be enough mulligan left for the two of you."

He lighted his cigarette and turned away.

They dismounted, off-saddled their horses, then each got a tin plate of grub and a cup of coffee from the cook. Mike Lonergan rode out to the herd while they were eating, and the trail hands kept to themselves—a quiet, sullen bunch of men. Reese could see that Frank Mason was thoughtful, no doubt wondering about the trail boss and his crew. After they had eaten and lighted cigarettes, Mason said, "A queer lot of cowhands. You still think he's Mike Lonergan from Texas?"

"I'd bet on it. And these riders are his kind of hombres."

"What are you planning to do?"

"Me?" Reese drawled. "Why, I reckon I'll keep riding west."

"Why?" Mason said. "There's nothing in that direction for maybe a couple hundred miles."

"I'm looking for a man."

"So that's it? Well, I figured you had something on your mind."

"Maybe I won't find him alive," Reese said. It was full dark now, and some of the trail hands spread out their bedrolls and turned in. "I've come a long way, hunting him. All the way from Austin, Texas, with stopovers at Valido, Dodge and Cheyenne. A young fellow named Dan Garrett. He's gunning for Mike Lonergan, and I want to head him off before he catches up with this outfit and gets himself killed. If he hasn't already done that and is now lying dead somewhere."

"You a lawman, Reese?"

"No, I don't carry any law badge."

"You've sure got me worried—about Lonergan and his crew."

"I'd be plenty worried, too, if I were in your boots."

"You know something that I don't know."

"Yeah," Reese said. He lowered his voice, seeing Lonergan riding in. "Your pardner, Matt Stambaugh, is a crook."

LONERGAN dismounted, stopped by the chuckwagon where he obtained a bottle of whisky, then came and hunkered down by the CPA man and his companion. "Have a little snort," he invited, handing the bottle to Mason. The rancher took a drink, handed the bottle to Reese. After a short one, Reese passed the bottle to Lonergan. And he said, as Lonergan drank, "I remember you now. You're Mike Lonergan."

The trail boss jerked the bottle away from his mouth, choking violently. Recovering, he corked the bottle and set it on the ground. He stared at Reese in ugly fashion. "Meaning me?" he demanded harshly.

Reese hadn't blurted that out unthinkingly. He had spoken deliberately, to keep the burly man's attention riveted upon him. For Reese was aware that there was a rider approaching the camp from the west, a rider with a pack animal, and he had a hunch that it was Dan Garrett. He wanted Lonergan to be unaware of that as long as possible.

CHAPTER X

Doublecross

MIKE LONERGAN was so intent upon Reese that he didn't hear the stranger arrive until the query, "What outfit's this?" rang out. Then he shifted his murky gaze away from Reese to the man who had reined in close to the campfire by which a couple of the trail hands still sat. Lonergan recognized the stranger at once, Reese saw. He lunged to his feet, hand to holstered gun. Reese rose, stood behind him, sharply alert.

The stranger was a young fellow, rail-thin of body and with a half-starved look on his face. His hat was tipped back off his forehead, revealing blond hair and gray eyes, and a crescent-shaped scar above the left

eye. He had a haggard, bedraggled look that showed he'd had a hard time of it recently. His manner was nervous, his eyes feverishly bright. He said again, "What outfit is this?"

One of the men by the fire growled, "Who wants to know?"

The rider looked the two men over, then glanced at the hands already bedded down and asleep. His gaze found Lonergan, Mason and Reese next. He turned his horses toward them—toward Lonergan, actually. The trail boss was rigid, his hand still to his gun. The rider reined in, stared at Lonergan. Even in the darkness, the hate could be seen in his eyes.

"You didn't go far enough, Lonergan," he said savagely. "But no matter how far you would have gone, I'd have found you."

"You've got the wrong man, kid. My name is—"

"I know what you're calling yourself now," the youth cut in. "But I'm not interested in that. All I want out of you is money—the money you stole off me. I aim to have it, even if I have to take it off your dead body. You've got hold of your gun, Lonergan. Go ahead and draw it, if you think you can outshoot me. Go ahead, damn you!"

Lonergan eased his hand away from his gun, but the danger to Dan Garrett, Steve Reese saw, was not past. Some of the bedded-down men had awakened, and the pair by the fire had risen and could back-shoot the youth without difficulty. Mike Lonergan had only to make a sign, speak a single word—Reese stepped forward saying, "Hold it. I'll handle this!"

Lonergan shot Reese a surprised look, but Dan Garrett, stiff in the saddle and hand to gun, didn't let his gaze waver from the trail boss. The youth was obsessed with Lonergan; he was unconcerned with anyone else and unaware that danger threatened him from another quarter.

He was far from rational. The loss of the cattle money, along with whatever else had happened to him, had unbalanced him mentally. He was extremely dangerous, even at this moment when his own life was in danger. Reese was well aware that he was taking his life into his hands by interfering, but still he moved toward the crazed youth.

"Old Sam Garrett wants you to come back home, Dan," he said softly. "I came all this way, hunting you so I could take you back to him."

Dan was aware of him now, but didn't look at him. He kept his gaze on Lonergan while saying to the CPA man, "Keep clear of me, mister. I—"

Reese jumped at him.

Dan uttered a startled yelp, but Reese got hold of him before he could bring his gun to bear. With a two-handed grip on the youth's left arm, the CPA man jerked him out of the saddle. He wasn't much to handle, with his body wasted away like that. Reese dropped him to the ground, then clipped him on the jaw with a punch that had just enough power behind it to knock him out. Lonergan said, "Step aside, Reese!" There was something wild and ugly in his voice. Whirling, Reese saw him with his gun in his hand and pointed at the unconscious Dan Garrett.

He said savagely, "Quit that, you fool! I'm taking charge of this kid!" He drew his right-hand Colt, threw down on Lonergan who, taken by surprise, took his eyes if not his gun off the youth sprawled there on the ground.

IT WAS still a danger-filled situation. A double-fused powder keg with one fuse stamped out while the other still burned furiously. Most of Lonergan's men were awake now, and a dozen and more guns could start blazing. Then suddenly Frank Mason stamped out the second fuse, as it were, by saying flatly, "Do as Reese says, Long—or whatever your name is! I don't know what's going on, but I don't want the Crown Ranch mixed up in trouble that may bring the Law down on us. Quit it now—you savvy?"

Like Reese, he had his gun beading Lonergan.

Lonergan scowled, muttered an oath, then holstered his gun. "All right, all right," he said sourly. "But I don't like some loco button threatening to gun me down." He stared at Steve Reese. "As for you, hombre, you're asking for trouble. I told you my name ain't Lonergan and—"

Reese said, "Frank, saddle our horses. We're getting out of here."

He kept his gun on Lonergan all the while it took Mason to get the horses saddled and to get the now conscious but dazed Dan Garrett back in the saddle. He remained behind, watching the burly trail boss, until Mason got Dan well away from the camp. Then, backing to his roan, he mounted and rode out at a hard lope. His back was an easy target for a moment, but neither Lonergan nor any of his men did any shooting. Mike Lonergan was too bewildered by Reese's part in what had happened to know what to do about him.

The three men traveled at a fast pace until they reached the hills that separated the rough country from the Squaw Creek range to the east. They halted then, Reese listening to make sure that none of the Lonergan crew was following them through the darkness. He heard no sounds of pursuit. He took out makings, built a smoke, and studied Dan Garrett in the flickering glare of his match as he lighted the cigarette. The young Texan looked sick and done in, but it seemed to the CPA field chief that he appeared a bit more rational now.

As the match flame died, Reese said, "Time for a talk, Dan. I'm sorry I had to rough you up back there, but it was the only way to keep you alive—which I aim to do. I know what happened in Dodge City, and I've been on your trail because of Banker Haskell down in Valido, Texas. It was Haskell who had me search for you, for old Sam Garrett's sake."

"Who are you, anyway, mister?"

"Yeah," Frank Mason said, "who and what are you?"

Reese smiled faintly, told Dan Garrett his name and added, "I'm with the Cattlemen's Protective Association. Sam Garrett is a member of the CPA, so that is why I was assigned to the case. I have two men helping me, and they're probably coming this way from Baker City, Oregon, right now. Dan, you were robbed of seventeen thousand dollars cattle money. A girl named Bonnie and Mike Lonergan were in on the robbery, along with another man. Right?"

Dan nodded jerkily. "I was leaving Dodge to head back home," he said. "It was a rainy night, and only a few people were on the street. I saw a drunk molesting a girl. I jumped off my horse, took her part, offered to see her home. She led me into an alley, and a couple of men jumped me. The whole thing was a trap. I was knocked out, and I came to inside a freight car. I was locked in, and I didn't get out until the car reached St. Louis. I was more dead than alive by then. And to make matters worse, a railroad detective grabbed me. I hit him, trying to get away. Well, I ended up in jail."

"Now I'm beginning to savvy," Reese said.

HE KNEW now why mention of St. Louis had upset Matt Stambaugh for a brief moment. Stambaugh must have believed that his robbery victim had been found dead in that freight car.

Dan continued, "I told my story to the sheriff, and he believed me—because I was young, I guess. He helped me get a short sentence, and when I was turned loose he showed me some pictures—wanted dodgers—of crooks and outlaws. To help me get a line on the men who'd robbed me. One of the dodgers was for Mike Lonergan. I recognized him as the man who had molested the girl."

"So from the jail in St. Louis," Reese said, "you set out to find Lonergan?"

"Yeah, I traced him from Dodge to Cheyenne, by accident," Dan said. "I hadn't any money, so I was riding the rods. I met a hobo along the tracks who knew Lonergan, and he told me he'd come through Cheyenne and had seen Lonergan there. I went to Cheyenne—and spotted the girl. She was working in a restaurant. You'd never think she was mixed up with a bunch of crooks, to look at her. She's pretty and kind of nice."

"I've seen her," Reese said. "What happened then?"

"I told her that I'd turn her over to the Law if she didn't tell me how to find Lonergan," Dan said. "She was scared. She told me. She told me that she'd been promised two hundred dollars for her part in robbing me. But afterwards, she said, she didn't take it. She was sorry for doing something crooked. And I felt sorry for her."

"You didn't ask her the names of the

other men in Lonergan's crew?"

"I aimed to find out their names from Lonergan."

"You'd have got yourself killed, trying," Reese said drily. "Anyway, Lonergan probably didn't get much of a cut out of that seventeen thousand. The job was planned by a shrewd operator who must have kept most of the loot for himself. Dan, you're too inexperienced to handle a job like this. I know you want to get your money back, so you can go home and face Sam Garrett. But you'll have to play it my way."

"You'll help me get it back, Reese?"

"I'll sure try."

"Who is the hombre who planned the robbery?"

Reese looked at Frank Mason. "The girl's name is Bonnie," he said, more to the rancher than to Dan Garrett. "She is now at Crown Ranch—with Matt Stambaugh, her uncle."

"Reese, that's hard for me to believe," Mason said.

"His share of the money that founded the Crown Land and Cattle Company was stolen money," the CPA man said flatly. "Stolen from Dan Garrett. You'd better believe it, friend."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What Stambaugh has done once, he's apt to do again."

"Meaning he may try to rob me in some way?"

"Just that. Your time is coming—coming fast," Reese said. "All the evidence of that I need is one look at that trail crew. Mike Lonergan and his tough hands, gunmen all. Why else would Stambaugh hire such men, unless he planned to make use of them? And his only use for them is to take care of you."

Mason muttered something incoherent. Even in the darkness Reese could see that the man was badly shaken. "You could be right," Mason said slowly. "If you are, I'm practically a goner. I've only six men to side me, and there's no lawmen within a couple hundred miles of Squaw Creek. I'm hoping you're wrong, Reese, but I can't just take chances that you are. What can I do?"

"Let's make a deal," Reese told him. "You side Dan and me, help us get his seventeen thousand dollars back, and we'll side you in a showdown with Stambaugh. But I'm warning you we haven't much time. We've got to talk turkey with Matt Stambaugh before Lonergan and his gunmen reach Squaw Creek. Once that bunch shows up anything can happen—and most likely will."

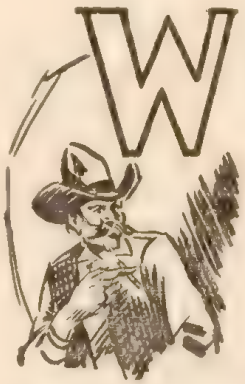
"This sure makes me feel kind of sick," Mason said. "There's Keith—If he finds out about Stambaugh being crooked, he'll sure not invest money in the Crown. Does he have to be told?"

"We'll see how we can work things out with Stambaugh."

"All right," Mason said. "Let's head for the ranch."

CHAPTER XI

Strange Courtship



WHEN the three riders reached the camp on Squaw Creek, it was nearly dawn. They off-saddled their horses, spread out their bedrolls, and turned in to get a few hours' sleep before going to the ranchhouse to confront Matt Stambaugh. As he grew drowsy, Reese heard Dan Garrett sigh heavily and say softly, "Reese, it's sure good to be among friends again."

"Yeah," the CPA man said. "Remember that from now on. Always keep in mind that that's what friends are for—to call upon you when you're in trouble."

"I reckon Sam took it pretty hard, eh?"

"I reckon he did," Reese said, yawning. "Not the money so much, though he is hard up, but you. It was you he didn't want to lose."

"I savvy that now."

The sun was already high when Reese awoke four hours later. The six cowhands were gone from the camp, but Mason and Dan were still asleep. Reese dug into his saddle-bag for soap and razor, went to the creek to wash up and shave, then returned

to find Mason crawling from his blankets. He shook Dan Garrett, woke him, said, "Time to be stirring, friend." The youth grinned as he rose, and said, "Best night's sleep I've had in months." He didn't seem to realize that they'd had but four hours' sleep.

Mason threw some kindling on the embers of the cookfire, rustled up breakfast. The three men ate, then lighted smokes and went to saddle their mounts.

Mason led the way to a ford, and they crossed the Squaw and headed toward the ranch headquarters. They heard the methodical racket of building as they neared the place, and then saw Mason's men working with axes as they cut mortises and tenons in logs for the walls of the new bunkhouse. Mason halted to talk to his men, then led the way across what would be the ranchyard when the buildings were completed.

A girl appeared in the doorway of the fine stone-and-log house, and Frank Mason said, with sudden feeling, "That's Diane Keith, the Englishman's sister."

"Yes," Reese said. "I've met her."

She recognized him, cried out, "Mr. Reese!" She hurried across the porch and down the steps. "I'm so glad to see you," she cried excitedly. "I thought—"

"That I was dead?" Reese said chuckling. "No, that fall off the train didn't kill me—just shook me up a bit." He dismounted, removed his hat, shook hands with her, aware that Frank Mason was watching with an annoyance that could be only a bit of jealousy. Evidently the rancher had fallen hard for this lovely English girl. Reese said, "Is Mr. Stambaugh inside?"

"No. He and my brother, Ronald, rode out onto the range when the men came to work," Diana said. "They've been gone an hour, at least."

"And Bonnie?"

"Oh, she is inside. In her room. I—I'm rather worried about her, really."

"Worried about Bonnie? Why?"

"She's so strange. She says she's not ill, but she doesn't eat and I heard her crying during the night. I do think she's grieving about something."

Dan Garrett had dismounted, and now he stepped up beside Reese. "Couldn't we see her?" he asked, hat in hand. "I mean—Well, I'd like to see her." He got the words out in a choking voice, a bashful look about him.

Reese gave him a curious glance. He could understand that Frank Mason might have fallen in love with Diane Keith, but he couldn't savvy Dan's being romantically interested in Bonnie. But some men were like that, Reese know. No matter how much trouble a woman caused a certain type of man, he always was willing to forgive and forget. And cowboys were apt to be that sort.

Diane smiled at Dan. "I'll tell her. Who shall I say wants to see her?"

"Dan Garrett, ma'am."

"Very well, Dan."

THEY waited quite some time for Diane to return, and Frank Mason asked Reese a question with his eyes. Reese said, "We'll have a talk with Bonnie, if she'll come out, and then see Stambaugh." He could see how eager Dan was to talk to the girl. It was perhaps ten minutes before Bonnie appeared with Diane, and then the CPA man said, "Frank, I'll want to question Bonnie. Maybe you can interest Miss Keith in something else, such as showing her how the work across the way is coming along."

"As though she can't see from the house," Mason said, grinning.

But he led Diane away when she came down from the porch, and Steve Reese watched the meeting of Dan Garrett and Bonnie. It pained him to see two young people so unhappy. Dan was eager to be friends with the girl, yet hesitant because of her part in the robbery. Bonnie looked miserable; more, she looked ill from worry. And afraid. She halted on the porch steps, her hands twisting nervously at a handkerchief. After one brief but frightened glance at Reese, she directed all her attention to Dan.

"You shouldn't have come here," she said thickly. "I told you in Cheyenne that you'll never get your money back, that you'll come to harm trying to get it back."

"I'm not alone now, Bonnie. I've got friends."

"But not enough friends. If only you'd realize—"

Reese stepped forward as she broke off, biting her lip as though to keep from saying too much. He said, "What should Dan realize, Bonnie?"

She shook her head. "It's nothing. I don't know what I meant to say."

"How much of Dan's money did you get, Bonnie?"

"None," she said, and looked defiantly at the CPA man. "Not a cent."

"Matt Stambaugh didn't give you your cut?"

"He wanted me to take two hundred dollars. I refused it."

"Because it wasn't honest money," Reese said. "And because it's not in your nature to be dishonest. But you're being dishonest now, Bonnie, if you don't help Dan get that money back from Stambaugh. It's like this, Bonnie. It's Dan's word against Stambaugh's, and Stambaugh will deny that he planned the robbery. Dan needs somebody to back up his word. You can do that."

"I can't!"

"You're afraid of Stambaugh."

"Yes. But it's not only that. I—"

"What else, Bonnie?"

"He's my uncle," the girl said thickly. "My mother's brother. When she died, I had nobody. My father died when I was young. I had no home. I didn't know where to go, what to do. I wrote to him, and he sent me money to come to Dodge City. He gave me a room and fed me. I owe him something for that."

Reese shook his head. "You don't owe him a thing," he said flatly. "You are young and pretty, and he made use of you. He made you an attraction in his Trailside Saloon, to draw men. He used you to bait Dan into a trap."

"He was desperate for money."

"So he told you, I suppose."

"The Trailside wasn't making money for him. He was no good at running a saloon. He hated it. He wanted to get into a more respectable business. He—Well, he told me that there was a man who owed him a lot of money. Enough money to help him get a new start. But he said that this man refused to pay his debt, and—well, it seemed all right to help him get his money by trickery. It was only afterward that I learned he lied to me, that I found out that he'd never seen Dan before then."

"That proves he's a no-good, Bonnie," Reese told her. "Look here. Once we can show Matt Stambaugh that we have proof of his crookedness, it's possible that we can throw such a scare into him that he'll play it straight from now on. We can try it, Bonnie, with your help. We'll warn him again holding a grudge against you."

Dan Garrett broke in, "We'll take you away from him, Bonnie."

SHE looked at him with hope bright in her eyes. But then tears came and she sank to the steps. She sat there, her face buried in her hands, her body quivering with her heavy but silent weeping. Dan sat beside her, put an arm about her shoulders.

"You help me, Bonnie, and I'll help you," he said gently. "Reese and I will take you to Texas with us. We'll find a place for you to live, a job."

She lifted her tear-streaked face. "You don't know him," she said huskily. "He'll never give in. He'll never admit he got your money, no matter what I say. Besides, he hasn't got it now. He had to give a thousand dollars of it to Mike Lonergan and a thousand each to a man named Jake Mardin and one called Frisco. He invested ten thousand dollars in the company he and Mr. Mason founded. You'll never get it from him!"

"All right, Bonnie," Dan said, rising. "If you don't want to help me—"

"Oh, no! Don't leave me, Dan!"

"You'll do it?"

"I—" She looked up at Dan through her tears. "Yes, I'll do it."

Steve Reese turned away, leaving Dan with her, slowly crossed the ranch yard to where Frank Mason stood talking to Diane Keith. He should have felt relieved. He could prove now that Matt Stambaugh had stolen the Garrett money. Any court in the land would accept Bonnie's testimony. But the deal between Mason and himself, Reese realized, would keep him from taking Stambaugh into court.

It was a deal that shouldn't have been entered into, but the CPA man knew that he wouldn't go back on his word even though Matt Stambaugh belonged in prison. Reese felt uneasy instead of relieved by having won Bonnie over, and the feeling came of a fear that it would take far more than proof of Stambaugh's guilt to make the man return Dan Garrett's seventeen thousand dollars.

Mason and Diane were laughing together when Reese approached them. The rancher said, "Reese, I've just been telling Miss Keith that this isn't a lonely country even if it isn't thickly settled. I've told her that it's a fine country for a man to establish himself in and that he can raise a fine family here as well as fine cattle and fine horses. The lady can't see it. She'd rather go back to some place called England where there's not even room enough for a person to draw a deep breath. You tell her, friend, who is right."

"You want me to help you court the lady?"

"It's an idea. I'm not making much headway, alone."

"What a strange courtship!" Diane said, laughing delightedly. "I always thought a romance was a lengthy, delicate procedure. But you Westerners rush a girl off her feet and try to win her by force!"

They laughed with her, then returned to their horses. They mounted, and Dan left Bonnie to join them. They rode out at a lope, aiming for a high point of ground. Topping the rise, they could see for miles in every direction across the Squaw Creek range, but saw nothing of Stambaugh and Keith. They rode west, and at mid-day met the log wagon from the hills. Mason swung alongside the big rig, talked to the teamster, then returned to Reese and Dan.

"Kelly spotted them about an hour ago," Mason said bluntly. "They were going through the hills, and traveling hard."

"Well," Reese said, "we can guess where they're headed."

"Yeah. To look for the trail herd."

"And they'll meet it before we can overtake them."

Mason nodded. "It'd be asking for trouble for you and Dan to tangle with Matt when he has Mike Lonergan and his hardcases to back him up. It'd be a fool play for us to go on. You agree?"

STEVE REESE saw it as the rancher did, and admitted it with a nod. But Dan Garrett was bitter about it, angry in his disappointment. "We should have faced Stambaugh when we rode in last night, even if it meant hauling him out of his bed. I say we go after him now, and to hell with Lonergan and his hardcases!"

"No," Reese said. "It'd be a suicide play."

"No matter how tough they are," Dan protested, "they won't buck three guns that are ready for them."

"Two guns," Reese said. "That's all there'd be. Frank wouldn't side us in a gunfight with his own partner. He's got too much at stake. No, Dan, we'll play it another way. Matt Stambaugh may come back with Keith and nobody else, even though Lonergan warns him about you and me. He's a great one for running a bluff, and he may figure he can outwit us. Too, he won't know that Bonnie talked. He'll think it's just a matter of his word against yours. We'll take a chance on him being a little too smart for his own good. Come on. We'll go back to camp—and see what happens."

They turned back, young Dan Garrett reluctantly.

CHAPTER XII

Face to Face

DAN GARRETT kept watch. It was close to midnight when he returned from the north side of the Squaw, wildly excited. "They just rode in," he said. "The two of them, a l o n e. Come on, come on! Let's go after that tinhorn!"

Reese and Mason hadn't turned in. They had been waiting by the campfire. They rose now, went to saddle their horses. When they were mounted, Dan called, "Hurry it up!" He swung away through the darkness

at a lope. He was across the ford when the other two men reached it.

The lower floor windows of the ranchhouse showed lamplight. The three men dismounted before the house, and Dan immediately started up the porch steps. Reese remembered his promise to Frank Mason, and said, "Dan, you let me do the talking. You savvy?"

Dan didn't answer. He strode across the the porch, opened the door, entered the house. The CPA man, hurrying after him, did not blame the youth too much. He knew that if he were in Dan Garrett's boots, he would act no less impatiently.

There was a hallway with a stairway to the second floor and doorways to rooms on either side. The room to the right of the hall was aglow with lamplight; it was the parlor, and Matt Stambaugh and Ronald Keith were there. They were seated at a paper-littered table that was serving them as a desk. Stambaugh was smoking a cigar, and the Englishman puffed on a pipe. They looked around as the three men strode in.

Steve Reese saw no surprise on Stambaugh's beefy face. The man had been warned by Lonergan, of course. Keith evidently took Reese and Garrett for two of Mason's cowhands, for he ignored them and nodded smilingly to the rancher.

"You're just in time, Mr. Mason, to see me hand this to your partner," the Englishman said. He held up a paper. "A draft on the Cheyenne Bank for one hundred thousand dollars. After inspecting the herd of cattle on its way here, I made up my mind that you chaps know your business. So I'm buying stock in the Crown Land and Cattle Company. It gives me pleasure to—"

"Cut it, dude," Dan Garrett cut in. "We've got more important business with Stambaugh."

Keith looked taken aback.

Mason said hastily, "Do you mind if these two men talk to Matt in private, Mr. Keith?"

"Not at all," Keith said, rising. "It's time for me to turn in, anyway."

He handed the bank draft to Stambaugh,

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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received in exchange a gaudily engraved certificate representing the shares of stock he had purchased, then said, "Good night," and left the room. Frank Mason closed the door after him, then turned frowningly toward Stambaugh. "I suppose you know what these men are after, Matt."

"I can guess," Stambaugh said, leaning back in his chair and puffing on his cigar. "I had a talk with Mickey Long and he—"

"Mike Lonergan," Steve Reese said harshly. "Quit playing games, Stambaugh. That trail boss of yours is a Texas badman, and no alias will make him anything else. There is a matter of seventeen thousand dollars that has to be discussed here and now, without any stalling. You're pretty sure of yourself at the moment. But in your place, I'd be worried." He gestured toward Dan Garrett. "This young fellow is desperate. After what's happened to him, nobody could hold it against him if he shot you. Maybe I should remind you, tinhorn, that men have been killed for less—much less."

"Suppose I deny that I stole his money?"

"Save your breath. Bonnie has talked."

THE bland look faded from Stambaugh's heavy face. "I was afraid she would," he said. "I knew my luck had run out when Lonergan told me that you'd showed up, Reese. Well, you've got me over a barrel." He was silent a moment, frowning in thought. Then he asked, "How about a deal?"

"What have you got to offer, tinhorn?"

"The seventeen thousand dollars."

"In exchange for what?"

"In exchange for you and Garrett letting the matter drop," Stambaugh said. "You can take me back to Cheyenne and turn me over to the Law. You've got enough on me to send me to prison. But that won't get the kid his money. I'll buy my freedom. That's the deal, Reese."

The CPA man's face was dark with anger. "It's not much of a fair deal," he said flatly. "What about all the grief you caused Garrett? What about the attempt on my life by your men?"

Stambaugh shrugged. "Take it or leave it," he said.

Dan Garrett muttered an oath, drew his gun, leaped toward the man. Reese grabbed him by the arm, held him. "Take it easy, Dan," he said. "Killing him won't get you that money." He looked back at Stambaugh. "It's a deal. Pay up, and we'll forget the whole business."

Stambaugh smiled faintly, then reached for a pen and dipped it in the inkwell on the table. He wrote busily for a moment, then held out a paper to Reese. The CPA took it, saw that it was a check for seventeen thousand two hundred and forty-two dollars. Evidently that was the full amount that had been stolen from Dan Garrett. Reese gave Stambaugh a frowning look, then glanced at Frank Mason.

"This check is drawn on the account of the Crown Land and Cattle Company."

"So I'm to help pay for your crookedness?" Mason said, looking at Stambaugh. "By damn, if it wasn't for giving the company a bad name, I'd let Reese send you to prison, where you belong!"

"I knew you'd consider the company, Frank," Stambaugh said mockingly. "You have got your heart set on making the Crown Ranch a big spread, and you'll let nothing—not even your principles—interfere. So you'll have the company cover that check, and you'll put up with a crook for a pardner. I'd say that brings you down to my level." He was silent a moment, puffing on his cigar. Then he went on. "There's just one drawback. Crown hasn't got enough money in its account to cover that check. It won't have until I deposit Keith's bank draft."

Frank Mason's face showed anger and disgust. "You're right," he said bitterly. "This brings me down to your level, and that's as low as a man can get, Matt."

Stambaugh threw back his head as he burst into raucous laughter.

Reese handed the check to Dan Garrett, who said, "Is it good, Reese?"

The CPA man said, "We'll see that it's good." He eyed Stambaugh suspiciously, then said, "We'll want payment on that check as soon as possible, tinhorn. That means we'll start for Cheyenne first thing in the morning. Be ready. You savvy?" He turned abruptly, strode to the door. He swung

around, said flatly, "Don't try to slip away during the night, to run to Mike Lonergan. Dan will be on guard outside, and he'll have my permission to stop you any way he sees fit. That's a warning you'd better heed, tinhorn!"

He went out, Mason and Garrett following him.

They left Dan Garrett to guard against any attempt on Stambaugh's part to go to Mike Lonergan for protection. They held their horses to a walk, riding away from the ranch headquarters. Steve Reese was silent, thoughtful. Frank Mason was bitterly regretting out loud that he had ever teamed up with a crook, saying, "What can I do about it now? How can I break with him? I signed a pardnership agreement with him that holds me to him! If I break it, I'll lose the Crown Ranch to him!"

"Maybe that's what he wants," the CPA field chief said. "To get control of the ranch and the company for himself. He's up to something tricky, Frank. That's clear enough."

MASON was alarmed. "How do you mean?"

"He was warned by Lonergan that Dan and I were here," Reese said, "yet he came back to the ranch, bold as brass. He stepped into a trap with his eyes open. Why didn't he stay with the trail outfit and come in with it? That way, we couldn't have got to him. He could have laughed in our faces."

"Yeah. It's queer."

"His whole game is suspicious," Reese went on. "I can't see him paying back Dan's seventeen thousand dollars that easily. Even with the company's funds. And he was too willing to let you know he was a crook. Then there's his being friends with an outlaw like Mike Lonergan. That hardcase wouldn't take a job trailing a herd just for ordinary wages. It looks to me as though Lonergan is after something bigger—and is sure he can get it."

"Maybe," Mason said. "But what would it be?"

"Frank, I figure they aim to squeeze you out of your partnership."

"By force?"

"Yeah. It'll happen when Lonergan and his crew get here. That'll be late tomorrow, or early the next day. Stambaugh needed you in the beginning. He used you to found the Crown Land and Cattle Company and to open the ranch here at Squaw Creek. He needed a cowman to help him, and a cowman with an honest reputation. Besides, you put ten thousand dollars into the partnership and—"

"I don't want to believe it," Mason said thickly. "But, damn it, I'm beginning to see it that way, too."

"Lonergan and his bunch are the giveaway."

"Yeah. The odds will be three to one against me. As I told you, I've got only six men to side me. That crew up in the timber will hightail back to Dalton at the first sign of trouble. They're not cowhands. But odds or no odds, I'll fight Matt Stambaugh!"

"That's probably what he wants," Reese said. "He knows there's no Law in this part of the country, and that you won't get any help. And if he can draw you into a fight with the Lonergan crowd— Well, you won't have much of a chance."

Mason swore. "He worked it pretty slick, making sure that he had Keith's money before he made the move against me," he said. "Maybe that's why he was so anxious to pay Dan his money. He must figure that's a good way to ease you out of the game before it starts. You'll be gone with him and the Keiths before Lonergan and his boys get here. I'll be an easy mark for Lonergan—he thinks."

"Maybe so," the CPA said. "But I can't see him giving up seventeen thousand to get me away from here. He's not that much afraid of me. Besides, he'd want to be on hand to be sure Lonergan did get the best of you. If he was on the way to Cheyenne, he'd be in a sweat about the outcome of his scheme. No, I've a hunch that he doesn't intend for Dan to cash that check."

They were near the ford now, and reined in.

Mason said, "What shall we do about it, Reese? You got an idea?"

Reese thought a moment, then said, "Yeah. We'll hold him as a hostage. We'll let Dan gun-guard him. Then we'll take your six

men and set a trap for the Lonergan crowd. Then—"

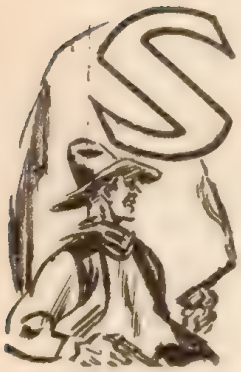
A yell from the camp across the creek interrupted him. It was one of the cowhands yelling a warning: "Boss, watch it! A bunch of gunhands jumped us and took our guns! Watch yourself, Boss! They—" There was a shouted curse, the roar of a gun, a scream.

Frank Mason would have gone on in spite of the warning, but Reese grabbed the rancher's horse by the headstall of its bridle. "Don't risk it!" the CPA man burst out. "It's suicide, man!"

He released Mason's horse, turned his own mount away. Mason followed him. They were none too soon. A half dozen guns racketed suddenly, trying to target them.

CHAPTER XIII

Gun-Hunted



STEVE REESE swung into a thicket of brush and scrub trees, reined in his spooked roan. He pulled his Winchester from its boot, levered a cartridge into the firing chamber. Mason rode into the thicket, six-shooter in hand.

The CPA said bitterly, "Now we know why Stambaugh was so easy to handle. He had this trap rigged for us!" He opened up with his rifle as a bunch of horsemen came charging toward the creek ford.

They came yelling and shooting, riding at a gallop, bunched. Easy targets. Reese's first shot drew a scream, toppled a man from his saddle. His second sent a mount and its rider spilling into the water. The horse rose after a moment of wild threshing, its saddle empty. The rest of the group—six riders—came to a halt that was so abrupt several of their mounts reared.

Reese missed his third shot, but creased a shadowy figure with his fourth and caused the hurt man to burst into wild cursing. The attackers stood their ground for a moment, raking the thicket with gunfire. Then they pulled back, shooting as they went.

Reese said, "They'll be after us again once they get over the scare we gave them. I'll hold them off, Frank. You go on to the ranchhouse, get Stambaugh onto a horse. We'll hold him as a hostage."

"Where shall I take him?"

"How about the camp up in the timber?"

"Good enough."

"I'll meet you there," Reese said. "Take Dan with you."

Mason turned away, lifted his horse into a hard lope the moment he was in the clear. He was hardly gone when Reese saw riders on the opposite side of the creek. Two raced west, seeking a crossing other than the ford. Two others followed them. Two more rode east.

The CPA field chief reloaded his Winchester, swung his horse about, rode east at an easy lope. He spotted the pair riding east on the far side of the Squaw after a time. After perhaps ten minutes of following the course of the stream without finding a shallow-looking spot, they decided to swim their horses across.

The Squaw was perhaps about fifty feet wide here, swift flowing. The riders forced their mounts into the current, slipped from the saddle, each man catching hold of his horse's tail. Reese let them reach midstream, then fired a shot over their heads. One man yelped with fright, let loose of his animal and was swept downstream. He struck out frantically, trying to swim back to the bank he had left. He was carried out of Reese's sight almost immediately.

The CPA man shouted at the other hardcase: "Cut loose, you—cut loose!" He put another slug close to a man who broke his grip and was also swept away. The two horses made it across, climbed the bank on Reese's side. He rode at them, drove them out across the dark prairie.

Once certain that the two men wouldn't be able to find their mounts after climbing from the creek, Reese fired three rapid shots into the air to attract the four riders who had headed west along the Squaw. He reined in, reloaded his rifle, listened intently. Then, upon hearing a drumming of hoofs, he struck out north.

Traveling at a hard lope, Reese gradually circled back toward the ford. He halted after a time, and heard no sound of pursuit. He smiled grimly, then rode on to the ford and splashed across this wide, shallow spot. He turned into a brush and timber, dismounted, left his roan ground-hitched, and on foot crept toward Frank Mason's camp like a bushwhacking Indian.

The Lonergan crowd had left two men guarding the disarmed Mason hands. One stood by the chuckwagon, the other lounged against a boulder at the far side of the camp-site. The Mason cowhands sat or lay on the ground.

REESE drew his right-hand Colt, began crawling toward the chuckwagon. He gained the near side of it without being seen or heard by the guards, but one of the Mason riders spotted him. The man tried to draw the guards' attention to him. He rose, said loudly, "How about me starting a fire and making some coffee." He moved toward the embers of the dying cookfire. The two guards moved toward him, one growling, "Set down, hombre! Set down or we'll set you down—for keeps!"

Reese had his opportunity then. He rose, moved swiftly around the rear of the chuck-wagon, came up behind the nearer guard. The man sensed a presence behind him, started to turn, but Reese leaped at him and struck out with his gun. The barrel of the Colt thudded against the hardcase's temple, and the hit man crumpled to the ground. Reese leapt over the prone figure, throwing down on the second guard.

"Drop it!" he ordered. "Drop that Winchester!"

The man muttered an oath, swung up his rifle. Winchester .30-30 and Colt .38 roared together. The guard staggered back against the boulder, slumped against it for a moment, then collapsed. Five of the Mason cowhands jumped to their feet. One remained a still, blanket-shrouded shape on the ground. He had been gunned down for calling a warning to Frank Mason earlier.

The gaunt, black-bearded hand called Mac crossed to Reese. "Good work, friend," he said. "That ornery son you just shot killed Reb. Where's the boss?"

"On his way to the timber camp in the hills."

"Why? What's he gone there for when there's fighting to be done?"

"He took Stambaugh there—as a hostage."

Mac nodded. "I get it," he said. "We'll make a fight of it from there, eh?" He turned toward the rope corral, calling to the other four to saddle their horses.

Reese went back to the brush for his own mount.

The five cowhands were mounted and armed. They had recovered their six-shooters and saddle-guns from over behind the boulders where the raiders had thrown them. Mac fell in beside the CPA field chief, and the other four followed by twos. They rode warily, at a walk. Topping the high rise west of the camp, they saw the lighted windows of the ranchhouse. The glow of lamplight revealed a number of horsemen milling about the ranch yard.

Mac gripped Reese's arm. "We could make a fight of it right now!" he said. The anger he felt over Reb's death edged his voice. "What do you say?"

"They'd fort up inside the house, cut us down as we rode in," Reese said. "We'll wait for Frank."

"Maybe they've done for him already."

"You hear any shooting from that direction?"

"No. What shooting I heard after that set-to at the ford was over to the east."

"Then Mason and Dan didn't run into that bunch," the CPA man said. "They're on their way to the hills, and we'll join them there. We've been lucky so far, losing no more than one man. No sense in crowding our luck. Come on!"

The six of them struck out for the distant hills.

A voice challenged them from the timber when they finally reached the dark, timbered slopes. Frank Mason's voice. Reese sang out his name, then added, "I've got your boys with me, Frank."

Mason and Dan Garrett stepped from a brush thicket, their rifles in their hands. The rancher looked over the shadowy figures be-

hind the CPA man, and said, "Who's missing?"

"Reb, Frank. They killed him when he shouted that warning to us."

"Reb," Mason said thickly. "They'll pay for that, so help me!"

"They've paid some already," Reese told him. "And, yes, they'll pay some more. Did you get Stambaugh?"

HE KNEW even as he asked, somehow, that they hadn't got Matt Stambaugh. A sense of helplessness gripped him as Mason explained that Mike Lonergan and seven of his men had ridden up to the ranch headquarters before he and Dan could go into the house.

Reese shook the feeling off, and said, "Well, tomorrow's another day. We're not too badly off. We've lost Reb, but we've done for three of Lonergan's toughs, which makes the odds some better."

"We've got to figure out our next move," Mason said grimly. "We can't just loaf around up here in the timber."

Reese nodded. "You're right," he said. "Stambaugh knows about the camp, and he'll figure that's the one place we're likely to head for, because there's grub there and we'll have to have food. He can send the Lonergan crowd to hem us in. We'll not let him catch us there. Here's an idea. Without cattle, there's no Crown Ranch. Stambaugh and Lonergan and their crew will have to get the herd through to Squaw Creek or they've gained nothing. What do you say we deliver it to them?"

"I don't get you, Reese," Mason said, puzzled.

"Lonergan left his chuckwagon, remuda and some of his riders with the herd," the CPA said. "He'll either go through the hills to meet it, with a part of his men while the rest are gun-guarding the ranch headquarters, or he'll wait until it comes through the hills and then take it over. By hard riding, we could reach it before sunup and jump the few men now guarding it. Then let Lonergan come and try to take it from us! When he comes, we'll have a trap rigged for him."

"Sounds good, Boss," the bearded Mac said. "Let's try it."

"All right," Mason said. "Anybody got a better plan?"

Nobody had, so Mason and Dan Garrett went into the brush thicket for their mounts. The eight men headed for the one pass in the hills through which the herd could reach the Squaw Creek range. They emerged from the narrow cut an hour later, struck out across the rough country to the west. After traveling another three or four miles, they sighted a pinpoint of light ahead.

Reese signaled a halt, then said, "Their campfire. If they'd kept driving all tonight, they would have had the herd on the range by daylight. We'll Injun up on them, and give them a fight only if they ask for it."

They rode on at a walk, halting again when they saw the dark mass of the bedded-down herd. Two riders were guarding the herd, circling slowly about it. Mason took three of his men, rode toward the herd. Reese went on toward the camp, followed by Dan Garrett and Mason's other two riders. A yell of alarm rang out over by the herd. A gunshot blasted, then a flurry of shots racketed. At the camp, a half-dozen men jumped from their blankets and grabbed for their guns.

Reese and his companions rode down on them, the CPA man shouting, "Drop your guns! You haven't got a chance!" Several of the trail hands were frightened enough to obey. One swung his gun up, tried to bead Reese. He was a little too slow. The CPA man leaned from the saddle, striking down with his gun. It thudded against the man's head, knocked him to the ground.

Another man ducked behind the chuckwagon, opened fire from there. Reese knew him. Jake Mardin, the burly hardcase who had thrown him off the train. Surprise gripped the CPA man. He hadn't expected Mardin to be at the camp. He wheeled his horse about, put the chuckwagon between him and Mardin, then dropped from the saddle.

MARDIN began to run, fleeing from the camp. Reese went after him, holding his fire. Mardin tripped, fell sprawling, then shouted, as he rose to his hands and knees, "Don't shoot, Reese! I give up!"

Reese had halted fifty feet away. "All right," he said. "Throw down your gun."

"I dropped it when I fell."

"Get up then, and walk toward me with your hands high."

Mardin slowly got to his feet, stood swaying for a moment, then took a limping step forward. Reese tensed, readied his gun, snapped, "Get your hands up, Mardin."

The big hardcase muttered an oath, then started to lift his hands. There was a glint of metal. Reese flung himself sideward an instant before the gun in Mardin's hand blazed. He stepped into an unseen foot-deep gully, and so was thrown off balance. He fired as he fell, but his shot, like Mardin's, was a miss.

Reese landed heavily on his left side in the gully, half-stunned. He heard Jake Mardin let out a jubilant yell and come running forward. He scrambled up, alarm knifing through him. He saw Mardin's gun beading him, saw the man about to fire pointblank at him. A shot came, but not from Mardin's weapon.

The man grunted under the impact of the slug that tore into him. He spun about, fired at somebody Reese couldn't see. Then two more shots blasted, and Mardin toppled into the gully and lay dead at the CPA man's feet.

"Doc?" a voice called—Dusty Trail's voice. "You all right, Doc?"

CHAPTER XIV

Bushwhackers

OUT from among a cluster of huge boulders rode Dusty and Hank Ball.

They holstered their guns, dismounted. Reese put his gun away, shook hands with the roly-poly Dusty and the lanky Hank.

"How'd you get here just at the right moment?" he asked.

"We've been following Jake Mardin and his two partners like their shadows," Dusty said, lighting a stogie. "Hank caught up with me at Baker City, and those three took a stage to Boise City, Idaho, when they found out that Dan Garrett had left there some days earlier. So we took the next stage east. At Boise we got horses, outfitted with some camp gear and provisions, and headed in this direction. Mardin and his partners were always ahead of us, and easy to track. They knew we were following them, and a couple times they tried to bushwhack us."

He paused to puff on the cigar.

And Hank said, "We were traveling plenty fast. Mardin tried his best to catch up with Dan Garrett. Late today he caught up with this trail outfit, and Dusty and I camped about a mile to the west. We were worried that bunch might try to jump us tonight, so we broke camp and were aiming to circle around them when the shooting broke out. What's going on, anyway, Doc?"

While Reese was telling his two fellow CPA men what had happened since he had left Hank at Hanlon's Junction, Frank Mason and Dan Garrett rode up. He introduced them to Hank and Dusty.

Mason said, "We had to kill one of the night herders, Reese, but we've got the others as prisoners. The herd stampeded toward the hills when the shooting started, but it can't do much scattering. We'll be able to gather the cattle without any trouble in the morning."

"Unless Lonergan and the rest of his crew show up," Reese said. "We'd all better get some rest before daylight, just in case they do show up."

The three CPA men took the first turn at standing guard over the six disarmed Lonergan men, then were spelled by Frank Mason, Dan Garrett and Mac Shayne. At dawn, they ordered the Negro cook to rustle up breakfast. Mason and his men and Dan Garrett went out to gather up the cattle after they ate.

The three CPA men ordered the prisoners, except for the cook, who was uninterested in what was going on, to bury Jake Mardin and the other man who had been killed. Once the graves were filled in, the five sullen prisoners were told to saddle their horses.

Reese had Dusty and Hank to escort them through the hills and give them a start of a half dozen miles on the way to Dalton. The CPA field chief gave the five a stern warning against returning to the Squaw Creek range.

After they had headed out, Reese saddled his roan and rode out to help round up the cattle. It was mid-day when the herd was shaped up again, and Frank Mason asked Reese, "What's the next move? Shall we drive through the pass?"

Reese nodded. "Then it'll be Lonergan's move," he said. "I'll go scout the pass, so we don't run into an ambush."

Steve Reese rode through the timber on the slope overlooking the pass. He was too old a hand at this grim sort of game to take needless risks. The cut extended a half mile through the hills, winding one way and another, seldom more than a hundred feet across and often narrowing down to half that width.

He was close to the eastern end of the pass when he sighted a bunch of horsemen coming across the range from the direction of Squaw Creek. There were eight riders in the group, which meant that five more of the Lonergan crowd had stayed behind to guard against a surprise attack against the ranch headquarters.

The eight rode warily, two with rifles across their saddles and the others with hands to holstered six-shooters. It was obvious that they were uneasy, that they feared an attack by Frank Mason and his sympathizers at any moment.

REESE could not see the west entrance to the pass, but he knew that by now Mason and his riders had reached it with the point of the herd. If the Lonergan crew were permitted to go on, the two groups would meet head on within the cut. The result would be a bloody fight and, with trail hands scattered the length of the herd, the Mason bunch would be at a disadvantage.

Reese reached for his saddle-gun.

He opened fire on the armed riders at long range, causing them to mill about in sudden confusion. After three shots, he held his fire and waited for them to make the next move. Hurriedly they dismounted, sought cover. Then Frank Mason and Dan Garrett came riding through the pass, drawn by the shooting. Reese called down to them, then said, as they came quartering upslope to the timber, "There's eight of the Lonergan crowd just outside the pass entrance. I don't know whether they were on their way to pick up the herd or if they were hunting us. Anyway, I've got them stopped for the moment."

Mason peered down on the gunmen. "Looks like they've got us boxed in the pass," he said flatly. "They can pick us off as we ride out."

It was true enough. They were behind cover, some in a brush clump and some in an arroyo, and near enough to cut down by any riders emerging from the pass.

Reese said, "There's a way to handle them, Frank. Keep your men behind the herd, and drive through as fast as you can—straight toward them. Dan can stay here with me and help keep them where they are. They'll pull out once the herd bears down on them."

Mason nodded, turned his horse about, headed back through the cut. In a few minutes the leaders of the herd appeared, and far back through the pass guns racketed and men shouted as Mason and his riders attempted to force the cattle into a run. Alarm swept through the herd with the swiftness of an electrical current. The pounding of hoofs and clashing of horns rose to a thunderous roar. A bunch of big steeds led the herd like the vanguard of an army.

The Lonergan hands became aware of what was happening even before the first fear-maddened animals tore from the pass. They broke from cover, headed for their mounts.

Reese yelled at Dan Garrett, "Spook their horses!" He started firing as rapidly as he could work the Winchester's lever and trigger, his slugs striking the ground about the horses' hoofs.

The noise of the stampede had already frightened the Lonergan crew's horses and now, spooked by the bullets, they wheeled as one and broke into a hard run. The frustrated men stopped running, staring at the gigantic Juggernaut of cattle bearing down

on them from the pass. They, too, started to run in panicky flight, and the wave of cattle streamed between them and their fleeing mounts.

The vast herd rushed through the pass in a matter of minutes, and Frank Mason and his riders followed them at a gallop. Reese and Dan put their horses downslope, the CPA man signaling to Mason. They gathered at the pass entrance, peering toward the eight dismounted Lonergan men, now forted up in a cluster of small boulders that gave them some scant cover.

Reese said, almost gleefully, "We've got them trapped! Most of them left their rifles on their saddles, and we can pick them off at long range if they won't give up. I'll ride out and try to reason with them."

He rode out, holding his empty right hand high, taking a chance on the gunmen realizing that they were not in a position to put up a fight they could win. They held their fire, and the CPA man rode to within speaking distance before halting.

"Mike Lonergan with you men?"

"Naw. He's at the ranchhouse."

"You want to give up now, or have us snipe at you with our rifles?"

THEY talked it over, then one of them called, "What happens to us if we give up?"

Reese said, "We'll give you your horses and escort you part way to Dalton. Once you're off Squaw Creek range, you're on your own—so long as you don't come back." He lifted the roan's reins. "Leave your guns behind when you come out of those rocks."

He rode back to join his crowd.

Mason had sent out a couple of his riders to catch up the trapped men's horses. By the time they returned, it was over. The eight men came from the rocks, a sheepish looking lot. Dan Garrett took the rifles off the saddles of the horses, dropping them to the ground. When the eight were mounted, Reese told them to head south. He and Dan trailed after them, making sure that none tried to get back to the ranch headquarters.

It was late afternoon when Reese and Dan Garrett got back to the part of the range near the pass. The chuckwagon had come up, and the big Negro cook had supper on the fire. Dusty Trail and Hank Ball were back from herding their group of prisoners toward Dalton, and were engaged in good-natured bantering while standing guard on a rise of ground east of the chuckwagon.

"Any signs of riders?" Reese asked, reining in beside the pair.

"We haven't seen any, Doc," Hank said. "But Mason sighted one before we got here. He tried to catch him, but the hombre took one look and headed back the way he'd come. That means that Stambaugh and Lonergan know by now, or soon will know, that we've got the upper hand."

"We going to smoke them out, Doc?" Dusty asked.

"He's the hombre who can do it," Hank said. "One whiff of his stogie and—"

"I just want to know for the redhead's sake," Dusty broke in. "He's dying to see that Bonnie girl again, even though she won't give him a tumble."

Reese laughed. "Yeah," he said. "We'll go and smoke them out. We'll start for the ranch headquarters as soon as we've had chuck." His amusement vanished as he turned toward the chuckwagon, and the somber look returned to his face.

More than any man Reese had ever known, the field chief was thinking, Matt Stambaugh personified evil. Some men were of criminal bent because of stupidity, or a warped mind. But Matt Stambaugh knew right from wrong, yet he permitted greed to motivate his every action, and he would stop short of nothing to gain his ends. It was easy to have no pity for such a man, and Steve Reese was eager for the showdown that was at hand.

It was nearly sundown when, after having eaten, Reese and his bunch mounted and rode east across the Squaw Creek range. They crossed the creek at a ford some miles west of the ranch headquarters. They pushed their horses hard, each and every man in the group as eager as Steve Reese for the showdown. The purplish haze of dusk lay over the prairie when at last they saw the stone-and-log ranchhouse, topping a rise not far from it.

They were sighted at once.

A rifle cracked, and they heard the shriek of the slug.

Reese signaled to the others, and they all dismounted and dropped low to the ground. They could see several saddled horses over by the half-finished bunkhouse, but no humans showed themselves. Reese saw that capturing or killing Matt Stambaugh wasn't going to be easy.

Frank Mason said, "One of us may as well go in and tell them they're trapped, make them see that they may as well give up."

"It'd be suicide," Reese said grimly. "Stambaugh and Lonergan won't respect a flag of truce—or anything else. They know that this is the end for them, and they'll be as vicious as cornered rats."

"Suppose we rush the place?"

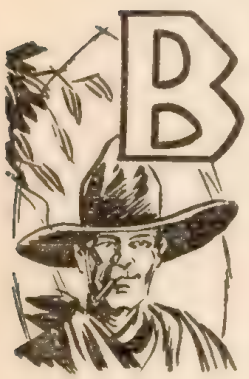
"There are ten of us," the CPA man told Mason. "There are six of them, at least. Stambaugh, Lonergan and maybe four of Lonergan's toughs. They'd pick us off before we even got close, even though we outnumber them. And if we start shooting into the house, we'll endanger Ronald Keith and the women. Frank, this is a tough nut to crack."

Dusty Trail sang out, "There's somebody!" And Hank Ball shouted, "Hold your fire! It's a woman!"

It was Bonnie.

CHAPTER XV

Remorse—And Retribution



BONNIE came down the porch steps, broke into a run, headed toward the rise where the riders had halted. Dan Garrett jumped up, swung onto his horse, rode wildly down toward the girl.

A man rushed from the house after the fleeing girl. She tripped, fell to her knees. Her pursuer gained, but Dan reached her ahead of him. Bonnie picked herself up, reaching up to the rider. Dan gave her a hand, pulled her up in front of her, wheeled his horse about.

The man from the house stopped running and swung his gun up to shoot Dan in the back. Reese sighted with his Winchester, but several other rifles fired before he could squeeze the trigger. Slugs tore into the gunman, knocking him lifelessly to the ground. Frank Mason, Dusty Trail and Hank Ball had fired. Guns roared from the windows of the ranchhouse, but Dan passed over the crest of the rise in safety.

Reese rose, ran to him, lifted Bonnie to the ground. Dan dropped from the saddle, took the girl in his arms. She sobbed against his shoulder, and he tried to comfort her. Shortly, Bonnie got control of herself. She lifted her head, said thickly, "I had to warn you, Dan. I was afraid to risk it, but—well, I owed it to you."

"What is it, Bonnie?" Dan asked.

"They're waiting for darkness," the girl said. "Matt Stambaugh knew he had lost when he learned that you and your friends had taken over the herd. He's given up all hope of holding the Crown Ranch, but he still has that bank draft for one hundred thousand dollars. He hopes to escape to Cheyenne. He'll cash the draft, then disappear. He's promised Mike Lonergan a cut of the money if Lonergan and his men help him get away. I heard them talking, but they don't know I overheard. As soon as it's full dark, they'll leave the house. Lonergan and his men will lead you in one direction while Matt heads in another. Matt has a horse in the brush near the ford. Dan, if he gets away, you won't get back your money!" Bonnie was close to hysteria.

Reese said, "Stay with her, Dan. I'll stop Matt Stambaugh."

He returned to the others, told them what the girl had said.

Frank Mason said, "It's nearly dark. That means they'll make a break any time. How shall we work it, Reese?"

The CPA field chief said, "Lonergan and his men have their horses over by the bunkhouse. You and the others Injun down, soon as it's dark enough, and spring a trap on them. Get Mike Lonergan—dead or alive. The others don't matter much. I'll go to the ford to stop Matt Stambaugh."

"Alone?"

Reese nodded. "That's how I want to settle this thing," he said grimly.

He set out for the ford at once by foot, descending the west side of the rise, and then turning toward the creek. He was out of sight of the ranchhouse even after reaching the Squaw, for there the brush and scrub trees gave him cover. Darkness was almost complete now, with but a few streaks of pale color in the sky to the west.

Reese began to run at a dog-trot, driven by some fear that Stambaugh might already be on his way to the ford. If the man reached his horse, he could easily lose himself in the darkness, and then it would be a race between them, a race to see who would reach Cheyenne first. If Stambaugh won that race by only an hour, he could cash the bank draft, even if it was after banking hours. Then, with a hundred thousand dollars in loot he could vanish, perhaps never to be found again.

REESE had reached the ford when guns began to racket over at the ranch headquarters. Men shouted, cursed, screamed. Hoofs drummed. Perhaps a dozen shots blasted, then there was only the fading beat of hoofs as some of the Lonergan crowd escaped. Nearer was the sound of running footsteps, and Reese tensed.

A crude road had been opened by the passage of riders and of the log wagon since the ranch headquarters had gone into construction. It ran from Frank Mason's camp to the headquarters site. The footsteps pounded along this road. A shadowy figure loomed through the darkness. A bulky figure. Matt Stambaugh.

Reese stepped to the middle of the road, his back to the creek.

"All right, tinhorn!" he called out. "This is as far as you go!"

Stambaugh halted, no more than fifty feet away. He was unaccustomed to running, and he was panting so hard that Reese could hear the whistling sound of his breathing. Stambaugh said thickly, a sort of desperation in his voice, "Reese?"

"That's right, tinhorn!"

"A deal, Reese! I'll cut you in and—"

"Is that a gun in your hand, tinhorn."

"I—"

"Drop it or make use of it," Reese cut in. "I don't care which!"

Stambaugh did neither. He whirled and plunged into brush. Reese swung his gun up, fired a shot over the man's head. It didn't stop Stambaugh. He ran a little farther, then swung onto the horse waiting there in the thicket. Reese started into the brush as the animal, spooked by the gunfire, began a wild bucking.

Matt Stambaugh was no horseman. He was bucked from the saddle, fell to the ground. He swore savagely, then picked himself up and tried to catch up the horse's reins. The animal shied away from him. Stambaugh cried out in despair then, aware that Reese was closing in, he swung around and started shooting.

He was no better with a gun than with a horse. He squeezed out two shots before a slug from the CPA man's gun found him, but both his shots were far wide of their mark. He collapsed to the ground, and was dead when Reese bent over him. . . .

They gathered in the ranchhouse—Steve Reese, Frank Mason, Dan Garrett, Ronald Keith. The other men were on the porch, keeping watch. A needless watch. Mike Lonergan had been killed in a fight in the ranchyard, and without him his tough hands had no reason to return. Reese had Matt Stambaugh's wallet. He tossed it onto the table after taking the bank draft from it. He handed the paper to Frank Mason. The rancher looked at it frowningly, then shrugged and passed it to Keith.

"You don't want to put money into an outfit like this one turned out to be," Mason said. "And I don't blame you any."

"On the contrary," the Englishman said. "The outfit has a good range, fine stock, capable riders, and a trustworthy boss. Your returning my investment proves that you are a man of principle, old man."

"You mean—"

"I intend to hold onto the stock I've acquired in the Crown Land and Cattle Company," Keith said, smiling and returning the bank draft to Mason. "I feel that I have made a good investment. There is only one

request that I have to make." He glanced at Steve Reese. "I think that the Crown Ranch should become a member of the Cattlemen's Protective Association."

"It's a deal," Frank Mason said, grinning.

Dan Garrett said, "What about my seventeen thousand dollars? Is this bank draft in my pocket going to get me my money?"

Mason nodded. "It's as good as gold," he said. "Matt Stambaugh was head of the company when he signed it. I'll go to Cheyenne with you and cover it. We'll leave for Cheyenne in the morning."

VOICES sounded in the hallway. Diane Keith and Bonnie appeared from upstairs. Steve Reese saw how Frank Mason turned to Diane and Dan Garrett to Bonnie. He looked at Ronald Keith. The two men exchanged a smile, and the Englishman said, "There's one thing that takes precedence over financial matters—romance."

Reese looked lingeringly at the lovely Diane, saw that she had eyes only for Frank Mason. He said, "I wouldn't know about that. I'm a bachelor, myself."

"I, too, old boy," said Keith. "But at least we can have a drink, what?"

They had a drink, then shook hands, and Reese left the house. He said to Dusty and Hank, "It's over and done with. No use for us to hang around here. Let's get started for Texas."

Dan Garrett and Bonnie came out onto the porch as the three CPA men swung to their saddles. Dan said, "You'll send word to Valido that I'm on my way home, Reese?"

"I'll do that, Dan."

"I want Sam Garrett to know that I'm bringing his money with me," the young fellow said. "And a wife, too."

"Don't take too long on the way," Reese said, and turned away.

They rode south across the moonlit range, Steve Reese with the pudgy Dusty Trail on his right and the lanky Hank Ball on his left, not looking back at all. The people of Crown Ranch would never forget that the spread had been founded in gunsmoke and treachery, just as Dan Garrett would never lose the memory of the outcome of his first trail drive to Dodge City.

But to the three CPA men it was just another job well done, and instead of discussing it they were already wondering what sort of case their chief in Austin now had waiting for them.

Coming in the Next Issue

UP DEATH CREEK

An Action Novel of Arizona Cattle Country—Featuring Steve Reese and His Aides at Their Fighting Best

By SYL MacDOWELL

He crashed his six-gun over the Indian's head

Every Man Has His Fear

By LEONARD HUISH

The Kid was bound for Kansas—come hell or high water

WEED SIMS and "Purty" Jacobs were turning a pair of leathery jackrabbits over the coals when the scouts returned. There was an arresting sorrow in the manner of the scouts as they guided their trotting horses through the sage. That grimness attracted Weed's attention, and he looked up, apprehensive.

The two scouts dismounted, unsaddled, and turned their horses to the wrangler. They had a kid with them. He did the same with his pony, a stringy, long-legged roan. The kid was stringy, too; hair like an Indian's, ragged pants, rope for reins, but he wore good handmade boots.

Purty Jacobs spat in the fire, spraying ashes on the rabbit he turned. "Find 'em?" he asked, with a half-grin that made his torn face uglier than ever.

One of the scouts hesitated, pulled a cheroot from his pocket. He lighted it, carrying the hot coal with his bare fingers, before he answered. "We buried 'em," he said.

Two of the boys had gone out looking for wild turkey. When they didn't return, Weed Sims, the trail boss, had sent the scouts. "Comanches?" Weed said.

"We found 'em in the gulch, heel-strung. The fires was cold. Buzzards already been there." He jerked a thumb at the kid. "We

met him on the way back, ridin' alone. He wants a job."

The other scout spoke, his mind still back in the gulch where they'd buried the cowboys. "You couldn't tell which was which," he said, awed. "Wasn't no clothes nowheres, even."

Purty Jacobs grinned as he turned his blackened rabbit. "Slow fire don't do a man's face no good," he said.

A half-killed cry of anguish made Weed turn to the kid.

The kid had half a hand in his mouth, but he straightened up quick. Purty turned to look at him. "What're you doin' here, *sister?*"

The kid straightened up still more, and his face, which had gone dead-white, flamed red as a setting sun. "I'm comin' with you and them cows to Kansas," he said with spirit. "My name's Harvey Manno and if you're lookin' for a busted jaw, call me *sister* again!"

WEED stood up. "Leave it, kid," he said. "Purty didn't mean anything. With two men gone out of a short-handed start, we can use you. If you can chouse cows."

"I can chouse 'em," said Harvey.

"How old are you?" asked Weed; adding "It doesn't matter, if you care."

"I don't care," said Harvey. "I'm sixteen, I choused cows all my life with Dad, till—till he died last month, and I *could* go to Kansas alone, but I just druther not."

Weed nodded. "It's a long ride," he said, in a friendly way, to make up for Purty.

Purty sneered. "And a trail full of wildcats, hardrocks, and Injuns. Kids should travel with their mammas."

His fists clenched, Harvey stood over the squatting Purty—Purty who could kill him with one blow. "I don't have no mamma," he rasped, "and you don't look like you could handle the job, or mebbe *I'm* wrong?"

Weed grinned in relief as the cowboys guffawed. The kid would be all right. Purty spluttered, unable to crowd a retort into the laughter until it was too late. He gave up, and thrust the rabbit at the jeerers, who cut off chunks, juggling the smoking meat from hand to hand. Weed offered his rabbit to Harvey, who reached out, then recoiled from its blackness.

"I—I ain't hungry," he said.

"Dainty's a damned pilgrim, eh?" Purty said hopefully, but nobody laughed. The scowl returned to Purty's face.

With little prompting Harvey talked, when he and Weed climbed a hillock to look at the cattle bedded on the plain. "The Comanches got Pa," he explained, "and I'm goin' to Kansas. My sister's there." From a faded pocket he pulled a miniature that caused a double-beat in Weed's heart.

She was dark-haired, like her brother. She had a firm chin, and the kind of eyes that can smile but not lie. Kansas City wasn't so big. It had to be Ellen.

"She married?" asked Weed nonchalantly.

Harvey cast him a glance. "Not as far as I know," he said. "Pa never wanted her to marry no cowboy, like her ma did."

Weed's pride stiffened his back like a rifle barrel. "What's wrong with a cowboy?"

"Nothin'," Harvey explained, "except a cowboy don't live safe. To us maybe that don't matter, but women is different." He put the picture away and buttoned the pocket. He looked at the ground, and kicked juniper berries with his booted toe. His voice became almost inaudible, but the words came out like they had to—like they'd been bottled up for too long already.

"Ma got caught by Comanches when I was a year old and my brother was four. He couldn't keep up so they buried him to his chin. The sun was hot. They put a rawhide on my neck and tied it to a pony. Ma had to keep up, carrying me, or I'd have been dragged . . ."

Involuntarily, Weed glanced at the kid's neck, and shuddered at the red scar made fifteen years ago by an Indian's rawhide.

The kid broke off suddenly, and cast a look of hatred at Weed. "Why you ask me this stuff?" he cried. "Can't you mind your own damned business?"

Surprised, Weed could only stutter apologies for a curiosity he had not expressed. The kid hurried off down the hill, as if afraid his words, still hanging like death in the air, could still do him harm.

Weed sat on his heels and let his teeth help him think, sawing through a chunk of

plug tobacco. His brain was still puzzled when he let fly the first amber dollop of juice at a prickly pear. He stood up, sighing, and shook his head.

"Hell," he said, "I must be getting too soft for a trail boss. Maybe I ought to settle down and run a stockyard in Kansas City."

SO THE kid was Ellen's brother, and Ellen wasn't married yet, maybe. It was a year since he and Ellen had smiled at each other over the coffee she'd brought him at the end of the drive. Her old uncle, liking him, had offered an interest in the stockyard business. There'd been a fight that night, a drunken brawl, between his boys and the locals. A broker was killed, the uncle and Ellen had joined their voices in denunciation of all range-hands as crude uncultured beasts, Weed had sided with his boys—it had been a hell of a mess. But the worst of it was that he had liked Ellen, and the thing had reared itself up like a wall of dark thorns between them. And now he was afraid to look into those scornful eyes and try to explain.

A thumb-nail moon rode herd that night on a few wispy clouds, but otherwise the sky was clear and the starlight hard and cold. A dismal wind cried now and then in the pine tops. Weed rode the circuit until after midnight. Then he nudged gently the recumbent form of the kid.

"Wake up," Weed said.

"I am awake," said Harvey, slipping on his boots as if he had only been awaiting the signal.

"It's all quiet," said Weed, making conversation. "There's Gabby and Jeffers out there, too. Just watch the north, but keep an ear open. If you hear any birds call that ought to be asleep at this time of night—"

"They won't be birds," Harvey finished in a hard voice. He inspected his six-gun by the dim light, and climbed on the horse. "I don't need no talk about Injuns, Weed, no more than I need your help with that grizzly-bit rider you call Purty." He touched a spur, and the roan trotted out into the night.

Ten years earlier, Weed would have called that talk, but if the spread of time between eighteen and twenty-eight had taught him nothing else, it had taught him that when a man unloads his fears onto your shoulders, you must watch for his hate. At eighteen, Weed could not have handled that hate. Now, he hoped he was man enough to turn it. And no little part of the reason for this hope was darkhaired Ellen, who hated him too.

The cattle stretched out along the prairie by sun-up, their dust a yellow cloud moving northeast out of Texas. The day began hot and quiet. Weed hoped it would stay that way. The kid was riding north, Purty Jacobs south. Gabby was scouting ahead. The cook-wagon creaked one song while the cook sang another. Weed spurred his horse forward, urging from her fallen calf a cow who cried sadly, shook her horns twice at Weed, and joined again the dusty herd.

The sun was noon-high when they hit the trickle of a dying stream. Cook went upstream to fill his barrels, Gabby and Purty squatted on their heels, watching the cows and rolling quirlies. The kid, watching Gabby, rolled a sloppy one, but it held and he lit it. Purty, watching him, grinned, waited until he'd finished and got a puff, then tapped him on the shoulder. The kid spun.

"See this?" Purty pointed at a moccasin print in the mud, less than an hour old. Near it were the unshod hoof-marks of an Indian pony.

"So it's an Injun," Harvey said carefully, returning his attention to the cigarette.

"Only one," Weed put in. "Even an Indian's got a right to be thirsty."

"He was hurryin'." said Purty.

"To get here before we muddied up the drink," said Weed.

"Maybeso," said Purty, grinning, ugly enough to make a man's stomach revolt. "Or maybe ridin' on to tell his friends about all this beefsteak we're chousin'."

"Well," said Weed, rising, "we can afford to give them a few presents if they show. They used to have buffalo."

PURTY rose, too, and climbed into his saddle. "They don't *eat* the kind of presents they'll take," he said, watching the kid. "They *wear* 'em."

"Let's go," said Weed, gaining his own

saddle. "Purty, you ride ahead, Harvey, you ride over there on the west and get those leaders moving away from the water. Gabby, stay south with me. These cows are dropping a lot of calves."

Purty hesitated. "How about I chouse the leaders," he said, "and let *him* ride north?" He jerked a thumb at Harvey.

Weed stared at him, and flipped his cigarette into the stream without looking at it. "When you're trail boss you can give the orders. Just now you're taking them. Get moving, all of you."

For an instant Purty's torn face gleamed with anger, the eyes dancing with it, his battered lower lip dropping, his right hand hovering close to his gun.

"You want trouble," Weed said evenly, "ask for it now. If you don't want it, get moving."

Gabby turned his horse gently so that his own gun would not blast in the mount's ear. His right side was towards Purty. Purty glanced at him, then at the kid, who sat his horse quietly, exhaling smoke into the dusty sunshine.

"Which is it?" said Weed, his voice quiet.

Purty's eyes narrowed, Weed tensed to draw, and then Purty spurred his horse, whirled in front of the kid, leaped the stream and pounded northward to the head of the herd.

"Let's go," said Weed, trying to keep the relief out of his voice.

Weed did not see Jeffers or Purty until evening, when forks rattled on tin plates, one meal closer to Kansas. Jeffers reported distant forms on the prairie, likely Indian scouts. Harvey ate his supper apart. Purty scowled over his plate. Purty had been ahead, but he had reported nothing. Weed regarded him narrowly. Swabbing camp-biscuit in gravy, licking his whiskers, then his fingers, Purty's eyes never left his food. He talked about Indians, when there was no danger, to cover the fear that came when the danger was real. When Purty stopped talking about Indians it was time to look to your guns.

"Harvey," said Weed, business-like, "you and I'll take a look from that rise," he nodded to a rocky outcrop half a mile to the east. Spread out to the north and west were the cattle, an unbroken sea of them, lowing with satisfaction at the grass, working towards the little stream that flowed coyly, its course marked by a double row of rash greenery that would fade in another month, after the stream died.

Surveyed from the bench-top, the country dropped gently again with a row of hills silhouetted against a darkening eastern sky. An early coyote called, and a spot moved that could have been either the shadow of a tree, or a mounted Indian. Weed and Harvey dismounted, and examined keenly the horizon that rose, a silent rim, here jagged with peaks, there smooth as the edge of a cup. Weed was thinking, it isn't only Ellen. We're sure going to need guns tomorrow, next day, or the next. He rolled a cigarette to help him talk, and passed the makings to Harvey, who refused. Weed was blunt.

"I'm not caring for your business, but I have to know how to use my men's guns. You're young, so I have to ask. How much do you know about Injun fighting?"

HARVEY reached then for the makings, and rolled himself a smoke. It wasn't good, but it was better than the other one. "I ain't never killed no Injuns," he said. Weed nodded.

"All right. You stick close to me, then, till it's over." He nodded towards the distant hill, where a light appeared, vanished, then flashed again.

Harvey's face darkened like the eastern hills. "I ain't askin' your help," he scowled.

"Nor am I offering it," said Weed. "No more than I'm offering help to Purty, but Purty rides with Gabby, just the same. It's those cows *I'm* thinking about!"

Harvey frowned full into Weed's face. "Damned if I don't think you are," he said.

Weed coughed over his smoke. It is always disconcerting to have a lie believed so abruptly. "Speaking of Purty," he said to get off the subject, "how are you and him getting along?"

Harvey's cigarette fell apart, and he killed the sparks with his boot toe. "Why did Purty take out after me the second I hit camp?"

Weed shrugged, relieved at the sudden

change in the kid's attitude.

"Partly because a grizzly messed up his face and he hates *anybody* who ain't in the same shape, but mostly because he's scared. No man who has figured out his own self likes what he found, and when he sees his own fear showing up in somebody else, he kind of transfers the hate. It doesn't make sense, maybe, but you'll see it lots of times, if you watch."

Harvey bristled, but said nothing for a minute. Then, "Ain't none of the others scared of Injuns?"

"Maybe, maybe not, but you can bet they're all scared of *something*. Once I saw Gabby face up to a dozen lances, and him naked from a swim, with nary a gun to hand. He had a grin on his face a yard wide, when he dived at 'em. He got a lance in the leg, another alongside the head, but he beat two of the Injuns to death before we drove off the others, him grinning all the time. Scared? Hell, no, but listen to *this*: Gabby'll run like crazy from a common house-cat! Scared to death of them, and me?" Weed chuckled. "*You'll* kill a rattler as long as yourself with a stick of greasewood, but *I* won't even get close enough, can I help it, to bag one with a six-gun! When it comes to snakes, I want rifle distance!" He said nothing of the other fear, the terror of facing up to accounts with the woman who hated him.

The kid poked at the cigarette paper with his heel. "Ain't there no answer?"

"Maybe," said Weed. "Maybe if I meet up with a rattler and kill him at close range . . ."

"And if I—" Harvey didn't finish, and Weed didn't give him time.

Weed strode to his grazing horse. "We'd best be getting along. Bunch of boys out there haven't eaten yet."

Two days passed. Always on the horizon, or over a rocky hill, or behind a tree, there were watching shadows, and every hour they increased in number. If a man rode to the horizon they were gone, if he topped the hill, there was nothing but a footprint; and if he charged the tree, he found not even the smell of a painted ghost. Some of the men were becoming eager, a sign of nervousness. They sharpened their knives, cleaned their carbines, and shot buzzards. Purty Jacobs was morose, and Harvey rode with a hard chin and a wide eye.

On the third day the trail crew camped early in a rock-walled basin through which a stream hurried, flanked by cottonwoods. Twisted pines grew curiously out of the rocks, and when deathly quiet blanketed the valley, the pines yet wept their dismal cry.

GABBY, one leg cocked over his saddle horn while he spun a cigarette, grinned at Weed. "This place would give a toad the creeps. Ain't you got no better cow-hotel?"

Weed shouted at a steer which had stopped, legs spread, regarding them with its stupid child's face. The steer leaped away, joining the others. "Nope," said Weed. "Next water's too far. Anyway, we can get some rest here. There's only two ways in or out. Couple of boys can watch the cows."

Gabby peered among the rocks. "How about our little painted neighbors?"

Weed frowned thoughtfully. "You figure they'll try it here, or wait till we get in the open space again?"

Gabby shrugged. "They got us sewed up nice, but sieges ain't their style. We could hold out here for a year. I figure they'll try it when we're spread out, linin' the cows over the pass. Tomorrow."

Weed nodded.

The morning stars had not begun to fade before breakfast was over, horses saddled, and the cows began to move out of the valley. "Yip-hey-*yah!*" sounded from a dozen leather lungs, and the lead steer marched proudly before his charges. Gabby was due back. He had been gone more than an hour already, and the first gray light picked him out, a spot of dust on the plateau between the cows and the rocky defile that would extend the cattle in a long line as they crossed the pass.

Gabby's horse dropped almost at Weed's feet, an arrow's plume waved once from its heaving breast, and then was still in the first ray of morning sun.

Gabby's hat was torn, and fresh blood marked his unshaven cheek. He pulled the saddle off the dead horse. "It'll be an even fight, anyway," he grinned.

"How many?"

"I'd say about sixt to one. The whole plain is spread with dead buffalo, other side of the pass. They want cows, now, and I don't blame 'em."

"I wish we could just give 'em a few cows," mused Weed.

Gabby rubbed his gauntlet in the blood on his whiskers, and grinned again. "White men slaughtered their buffalo. Nope, they want blood, now, alongside their meat."

Several of the boys rode up, questions in their eyes. Purty and Harvey were among them, Harvey hanging back.

"This is it, boys," said Weed. "Highpockets, Ears and Dingo, you stay here. Make a noise like an army and ride like hell around those cows. The rest of us'll scoot through the pass with a hundred head or so to make it look good, but we'll leave the leader with you. Hang onto him until I signal, or Gabby signals, and then chouse 'em through. We'll either herd those Injuns back to Hell, or it won't make no difference. Come on, boys."

Weed looked for Harvey, and eased his trotting pony close. From Gabby's report, the herd looked to be safe enough here, but leaving Harvey with it would be harder on his spirit than an arrow through the lungs. Weed cursed the luck that made him take Ellen's kid brother into an Indian fight, which proved to him that he still carried Hope under his shirt. Then he kicked his pony into a gallop, snapped his rope at a straggling steer, and they drove the thundering hundred through the pass.

AN ARROW swished over his pony's mane, and the animal rolled a white eye. Guns in hands, the cowboys blazed over the heads of the beasts, as painted warriors, proud and bronzed, drove arrows and bullets into their midst. Jeffers dropped at the first volley, an arrow through his neck. Looking around for Harvey, Weed lost his hat to another arrow. He whirled, planting a bullet between the eyes of the man who'd sent it. The Indian's bow fell to the ground, he slid gently off his naked pony, and another Indian took his place. Weed sent a bullet at him, too, but his own pony shied, and he missed. Gabby was shouting, cursing, laughing, all between teeth clenched on reins, as he shot with both six-guns. Harvey was not to be seen. The cows had stampeded, and were losing themselves in their own dust, racing down the slope away from the hundreds of skinned buffalo rotting in the sun.

There seemed thousands of steel-eyed warriors, their cheeks carmined and chalked, their upper arms banded, their sweated breasts flashing targets as they circled, yelling like madmen, around the cowboys.

An Indian big as a house towered over Weed. In one hand he held a musket that looked like a cannon. Pointing it at Weed's head, the Indian pulled the trigger. Weed struck the gun with his rein hand and, rising in the stirrups, crashed his six-gun over the Indian's head. There was a terrific explosion, the musket leaped out of the bronze hands, and the Indian fell.

Weed reloaded, casting frantically about for a sight of Harvey. He saw Purty, separated from Gabby, backed against the rocky wall, parrying a lance with a carbine, his face ashen. Weed threw a bullet, missed, threw another, as the lance whipped the carbine from Purty's grasp. The second bullet tore through the headdress, and Purty snatched his carbine up again, sending a look of gratitude towards Weed.

Weed took a breath, wiped the sweat out of his eyes, and found blood with it. He hadn't remembered being hit. There was no time to think. Gabby lost another horse, which dropped under him with a bullet in its head, and Weed spurred his pony forward, leaving the main body of the fight to give Gabby a hand. Gabby didn't need it. His guns never seemed empty, and his aim was quick, cool and sure. Two lances flashed through the sunshine and dust: Weed ducked one, and caught the other in his shoulder. He felt it cut through the muscle, but there was no pain. An Indian pulled it, dragging him from his pony. He put his gun in the painted face and pulled the trigger. The weight left the lance, but Weed continued to fall, and his pony with him. His head swimming as he groveled in the dust, Weed thought, "We are winning. They won't stay with us much longer."

But a grinning painted face materialized

out of the haze and the dust, and a hand snatched at his head. He saw the glint of a scalping knife as his hair was jerked roughly by an evil-smelling hand. He tried to rise, to raise his hand, but the lance held him down. "Harvey!" he called.

The voice of Harvey did not reply. But the body of Harvey leaped off a horse, bringing the Indian to the ground. The Indian whirled to his back, the knife flashed through the air, and blood spurted from Harvey's arm.

The Indian, twice the size of the kid, rolled over, grabbed Harvey's arm, and gave it the breaking twist. Harvey, with a yell of anger, turned with it like a cat, planting a boot in the Indian's face. The Indian, surprised, grunted. A pony raced up, and a bronzed arm raised a lance over the kid's back. A carbine crashed over the arm, and the lance missed Harvey, killing the Indian with whom he was wrestling. Weed groaned in relief. It was Purty, fighting now with the mounted Indian, trying to bring him off his pony. Weed saw that as Harvey leaped to help him, they were both grinning the way Gabby grinned. Harvey grabbed at the pony's rope bridle, but he was too late. The grin faded slowly from Purty's face as he sank to the dust, the Indian tomahawk through his head. Harvey missed the bridle and the Indian galloped away. The other Indians had already retreated.

They buried Purty and Jeffers, but left the dead Indians to their own tribe.

Bandaged, sitting painfully in his saddle, Weed ordered the cows brought through. Harvey whirled to help, and Weed called him back. "Thanks," he said, trying to grin.

Harvey tried a grin with better luck. "It's the other way around," he said, then sobered, nodding towards Purty's slab. "He'd say the same, even if he did get killed provin' it to himself." Harvey turned again towards the herd and pulled up, pointing.

Weed looked. A rattlesnake, flicking its tongue at its disturbers, crossed the trail not four feet from Weed's horse. Weed recoiled, pulled out his six-gun, snapped the snake's head with a bullet, and managed a smile at Harvey, who was galloping away, waving.

"And now, Ellen," said Weed, looking towards Kansas and the rising sun, "I'll have a little talk with you." • • •

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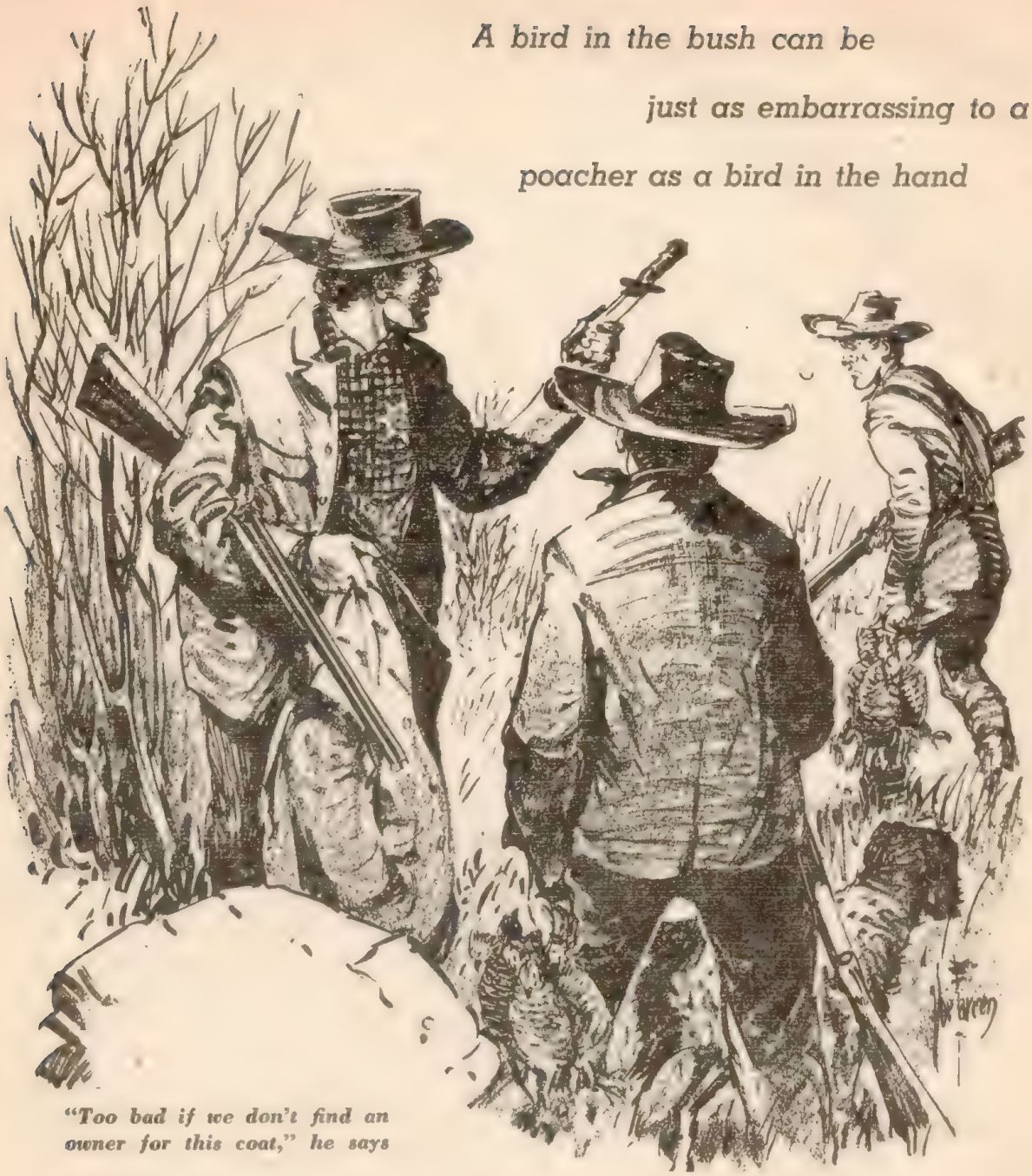
A bird in the bush can be just as embarrassing to a poacher as a bird in the hand



"Too bad if we don't find an owner for this coat," he says

Point O' Honor

By JUG MARTIN

I'M NOT a poacher. Never was, except maybe a little a long time ago. And in tellin' you about Jake Marston I don't want you to get the idea that I'm sympathizin' with him. But there was the darndest poacher that ever drew breath. There was nothin' that man 'd rather do than break the game laws. Jake made a point o' honor out o' poachin' just as you and me make it a point o' honor to live by the law.

There in the backwoods I guess there was always a lot of poachin' goin' on. But there was a lot more game then and there weren't so many to go after it. There was a lot of poachin', that is till Warden Blakely moved into town.

The settlement was right in the game country. We didn't believe in wastin' it but we sure didn't think much about the game laws. I guess we didn't like to change our ways very much and Jake he just happened to be the stubbornest.

The line was pretty well drawn right from the start. By the second day the Warden had been in town anybody could see that it was goin' to be the Warden for the law and Jake for poachin'. We were all standin' around the stove in the general store that mornin', talkin' about the frost gettin' the gardens when in walks the Warden with one of the Miller kids in tow. The kid's holdin' a couple of ducks and as the duck season isn't open we pretty well suspicion what's up. I guess that was the Warden's way of warnin' the whole bunch.

You can hear the talk retreatin' out the windows as soon as everybody sees the Warden and it's as quiet as midnight. The Warden looks us all over careful like and says: "I'm takin' this kid in this mornin'. Thought maybe some of you would like to know the season ain't open yet for ducks."

Most of us can see right there that the Warden ain't nobody to monkey with. He's got a pretty stern look about him when he wants to have. We see he's a big man with a sort of educated lookin' face. He wears gold spectacles with a little gold chain danglin' from 'em, and his voice is as clear and even as you please.

ABOUT then Jake steps out and he says, "Warden, we ain't never had anybody to tell us when we can kill game, and we ain't relishin' to have somebody doin' it now. If you want to get along here, I'd advise you to overlook a few things. If you don't, your job ain't goin' to be easy."

The Warden knows right then what Jake's part's goin' to be. Up till Jake took it up he'd had us pretty well buffaloed. We'd have probably quit our poachin' and that would have been that. But when Jake stepped out the wind changed pretty quick like. Most of us reserved our opinions right there till we saw how this was goin' to come out. Most men just like to follow the path of least resistance, and we were just waitin' to see which path that was goin' to be.

Jake wasn't all bad by a long shot. I don't think anybody is. But when Jake was set on somethin' he could be just about the orneriest critter that ever walked. And he resisted every change as they'd come up.

The Warden just looks us over after Jake says that. He looks right at each one of us and when he gets to Jake he looks him over from head to foot and he says: "Men, I'm here to stop poachin' and to protect the game. And as long as I'm here I'm goin' to be doin' my job."

That's what made poachin' to Jake a point o' honor. He had a little stump ranch out of town and about that time of year geese would come in and feed on his stubble and light on the little pot holes around. Everybody knows that Jake gets them whenever he wants. The Warden tells some of us he's goin' to get Jake, just to give him fair warnin', and Jake he tells everybody that there ain't no warden born who can stop him from poachin'.

Every mornin' after that session at the store we hear Jake pottin' away at them geese. About the third day just about dinnertime the Warden hits for Jake's. Everybody knows what he's up to and everybody's pretty anxious to know if he's goin' to catch Jake with a goose on his table.

Everybody's still on Jake's side, though we ain't sayin' much. Most of us 'd discovered by that time that the Warden is a pretty darned good fellow when he ain't doin' his job. I find out he's got one of the best grouse dogs I ever see and that he's just about the best wing shot that ever hit the country, and by the time I go huntin' with him a couple of times I like him a lot.

Without pretendin' to we all watched the Warden leave town for Jake's. About an hour later we saw him come back. He gallops his gray mare into town and goes straight home. We all figure from that that things hadn't gone just as he'd planned but

it isn't till Jake comes to town that we learn what happened. Jake never told us who got word to him that the Warden was headin' out there, but he heard some way, and he was mighty busy for awhile after he found it out.

Jake said the meal was all on the table when the Warden got there. He'd hid all the geese he'd potted except the bird they were havin' for dinner. Jake says he invites the Warden in for dinner just like he's buryin' the hatchet and the Warden accepts. He figures Jake probably invites him in because he doesn't want him pokin' around. When the Warden sees the bird on the table he smiles to himself and lets Jake's old woman help him to a big share of it. Jake says he knows the Warden's figurin' to himself how he's goin' to eat and then pinch Jake just to make the story better. He probably figures Jake's feedin' him goose just to dare him to take him in.

JAKE tells us that he and his old woman put goose on their plates but that they don't eat any. They just watch the Warden. The Warden he takes a big mouthful and he chews and chews. Pretty soon he swallows pretty desperately a couple of times and looks up and sees 'em watchin' him and he gets a little red around the ears. When he sees nobody else eatin' the bird he just makes out his meal on the rest of the things. Jake tells us he eats precious little, too. Then he gets up and tells Jake he's goin' to have a look around.

Well the Warden ain't very surprised when he doesn't find any geese hangin' there. And after thinkin' a little he ain't very surprised when he discovers that the bushel of feathers he finds back of the woodshed comes from a golden eagle. He puts two and two together and leaves without sayin' much of a good-by to Jake and his woman.

Jake tells us he had that eagle cooked for two days before, just waitin' for the Warden to come after him. He says the only thing that'd a made it better would a been if the Warden'd arrested him before he found out what he'd been eatin'. But we can see that Jake's pretty well satisfied with himself just as things stand.

It looked for awhile after that like Jake was goin' to laugh the Warden out of town. We all did a heap of laughin' about it, especially when Jake was around. One or two of the bravest ones even asked the Warden how he liked roast goose. The Warden just laughed and said that sure was a tough piece of chewin'. Guess he had to take it that way if he was goin' to stick around.

In about a week somethin' happened to balance things up a bit though. I was out grouse huntin' with the Warden, and Jake was out whalin' away at 'em too. The whole town knew that Jake didn't care a straw about the bag limit and nobody knew if he knew Warden Blakely was out that day. The Warden and I'd got our five birds apiece and were trailin' along towards where we'd left our horses when I spots Jake comin' up the trail the other way.

I know darned well that it's ten to one that Jake has a couple of limits in his coat and when he sees us I expect him to take for the tall timber. But he just grins and keeps comin' so I figure he ain't had such good luck with the grouse this time. I notice he ain't wearin' his old coat and that he's just carryin' his birds in his hand. The Warden doesn't show much surprise in seein' Jake. He just checks his license and his five birds. "I'm glad to see you're quittin' now, Jake," he says; "There ain't no use killin' all the birds in a cover when you have the chance."

Jake's eyes are really twinklin' and he allows the Warden is right. "I sure hated to pass up the rest of them birds, but what you say is right as rain," he says. "Ain't no use in wastin' 'em."

I'm really wonderin' if Jake's changed when that black and white pointer of the Warden's busies himself in the bushes and freezes to a point back about where I saw Jake come out of the brush. Jake looks kind of funny when he discovers this and I begin to grow a little suspicious. Sure enough, something's fishy, cause when we get up there we see that that dog's pointin' Jake's old kaki huntin' coat.

The Warden picks it up, and there's four more grouse all fresh and warm. Jake starts on down the trail just as if he has to get somewhere in a hurry but the Warden calls

him back. "Jake," he says, "this must be your coat. Maybe you'd like to have it back."

Jake looks innocent as a babe. "Never saw it before in my life, Warden. Somebody must have lost it here this mornin'."

I see by this that Jake don't care that much for that old coat, and I can see the Warden's been outsmarted again. The Warden can see it too, but when he goes through the coat again his face really lights up. He comes out of one of the pockets with Jake's old silver handled huntin' knife.

THE Warden acts innocent now. "Too bad if we don't find an owner for this coat," he says. "This is sure a dandy huntin' knife."

Now everyone in that community knows Jake's old knife. It's one his old man made a long time ago and it's really a fancy job. It's oil tempered file steel and it's polished till you can see yourself in the blade. The handle's almost solid silver and it's engraved with deer heads on one side and grouse on the other. We all know that Jake would just about as soon part with that knife as with his old shotgun.

Jake turns about four colors and I can see he's wonderin' if he dares claim it and pay for them birds. Then I can see his pride workin' and he says, "I hope you find an owner, Warden, but if you don't, bring it around. I'd like to buy that knife from you."

The Warden thinks this over and then he says real earnest like, "I'd sure like to sell it, Jake. I got a dozen skinnin' knives. But I wouldn't dare do it because the owner of this coat might show up to claim it some day. Guess I'll just have to keep it till then."

Well, I spread this story a little bit when Jake ain't around and pretty soon the boys are laughin' a little bit at Jake, too. Jake confides to some that he can't see how in the world he happened to leave that huntin' knife in that coat when he saw us comin' and ditched it. Probably he just didn't think of the Warden findin' it.

About a couple of weeks later Jake came got me to go deer huntin' with him. Knowin' Jake and knowin' that the Warden was after him I wasn't too keen on goin' but Jake he says he ain't goin' to do anythin' wrong, so I break out my old 30-30 and go along .

Well, the first thing Jake does is knock over a spike buck. Now a buck up here has got to have forks before he's legal and I'm pretty badly scared. Jake says we'll let him cool out and throw a tarp over him in the mornin' and take him in in the wagon. Next mornin' I back out, but Jake tells me if I do he's goin' to spread it all over town how scared I was, so I go along with him. We're comin' along down the road with the spike covered up in back when we come face to face with the Warden. I'm plenty uneasy at first but I get to thinkin' that Warden Blakely's goin' to know right off who killed that deer. He's goin' to know that I ain't got that much nerve and he's goin' to arrest Jake instead of me. So I smile when he stops us just to let 'im know him and me's still friends, though I'm shakin' a little.

Jake never turns a hair. He says, "Good mornin', Warden," just as if he was meetin' him in the store.

The Warden is pretty talkative. "Well, see you boys been out after 'em. Don't believe it's too good weather for deer right now. Too darned dry."

He looks over our gear pretty carefully and I can see his eyes show some interest when they light on that tarp behind.

"What you fellers got covered up in the rear?" he asks, just like he's tryin' to make conversation. "Guess you've been out all night and that's your bed."

When Jake answers this one I reckon he's gone plumb ravin' crazy cause he says, "That's a spike buck, Warden. We shot him last night and came up this mornin' and got him."

I figure we're cooked for sure now but I see the Warden mullin' this one over and I begin to see Jake's angle. The Warden's thinkin' that if he investigates that tarp and finds it's a bed, Jake's goin' to laugh pretty loud and be pretty sarcastic when he tells it. And he doesn't want to lose any more prestige around there till he can get Jake for sure. He calculates that if that is a spike buck Jake isn't goin' to be so all-fired cocky about it.

After a little studyin' the Warden says,

"Well, I'll be seeing you boys," and rides off up the road. I mop my brow and Jake grins and we take the buck on in. But I didn't go huntin' with Jake again for a while.

IT WAS along toward the end of deer season that this poachin' game came to a head between Jake and the Warden. Jake told me about it later, and between me and a couple of other fellers the whole country knew about it before long.

There was a shallow river runnin' through the settlement and not far from Jake's house was a small island that was grown up with tules where ducks and geese used to gather when they'd fly in from the grain fields. They'd hang around on the edge of the island in the mud and Jake he'd sneak over and get 'em every once in a while. He had a flat little boat that would float him over there, and when he had what he wanted, he'd just pole her back to shore. Jake had floated over there one mornin' and shot a couple of geese when he looked up and saw his boat driftin' down the river. Guess he hadn't anchored it very well.

Jake was cussin' and wonderin' how he was goin' to attract his old woman's attention so she'd hunt down the boat and come get him when he looks up and sees the Warden comin' around the bend in the river in another boat. Jake told me the Warden was just sittin' there, his shotgun across his knees and smokin' his pipe, headin' straight for the island.

Poachin's really a point o' honor to Jake by this time and he don't want it noised around that he's been caught red-handed killin' geese. He's wonderin' what the Warden is doin' with his shotgun but as there ain't room on the island to hide he ain't waitin' around to see. One of his geese is still layin' where it fell out on a sandbar between him and the Warden so he can't retrieve it. He said if he'd had 'em both in his hands he might have ditched 'em.

Jake gets the island between him and the Warden's boat and starts out as fast as he can go wadin' across the river for shore. He makes it all right but he gets wet clear to his armpits and by the time he gets home he's cussin' the geese, the Warden, and the day he was born, and he's so darned cold it takes a pint of white mule to get his voice workin' again.

Well, a worse officer than Warden Blakely almost gets Jake for that one because for a week he's just about dead with pneumonia. Everybody in town figures he's almost done for and some of us sit up with him. Everybody's on the Warden's side now. It's plain as the nose on your face that Jake's lost. Some are pretty uppity about it and say Jake had it comin' to him for breakin' the law like he was doin'.

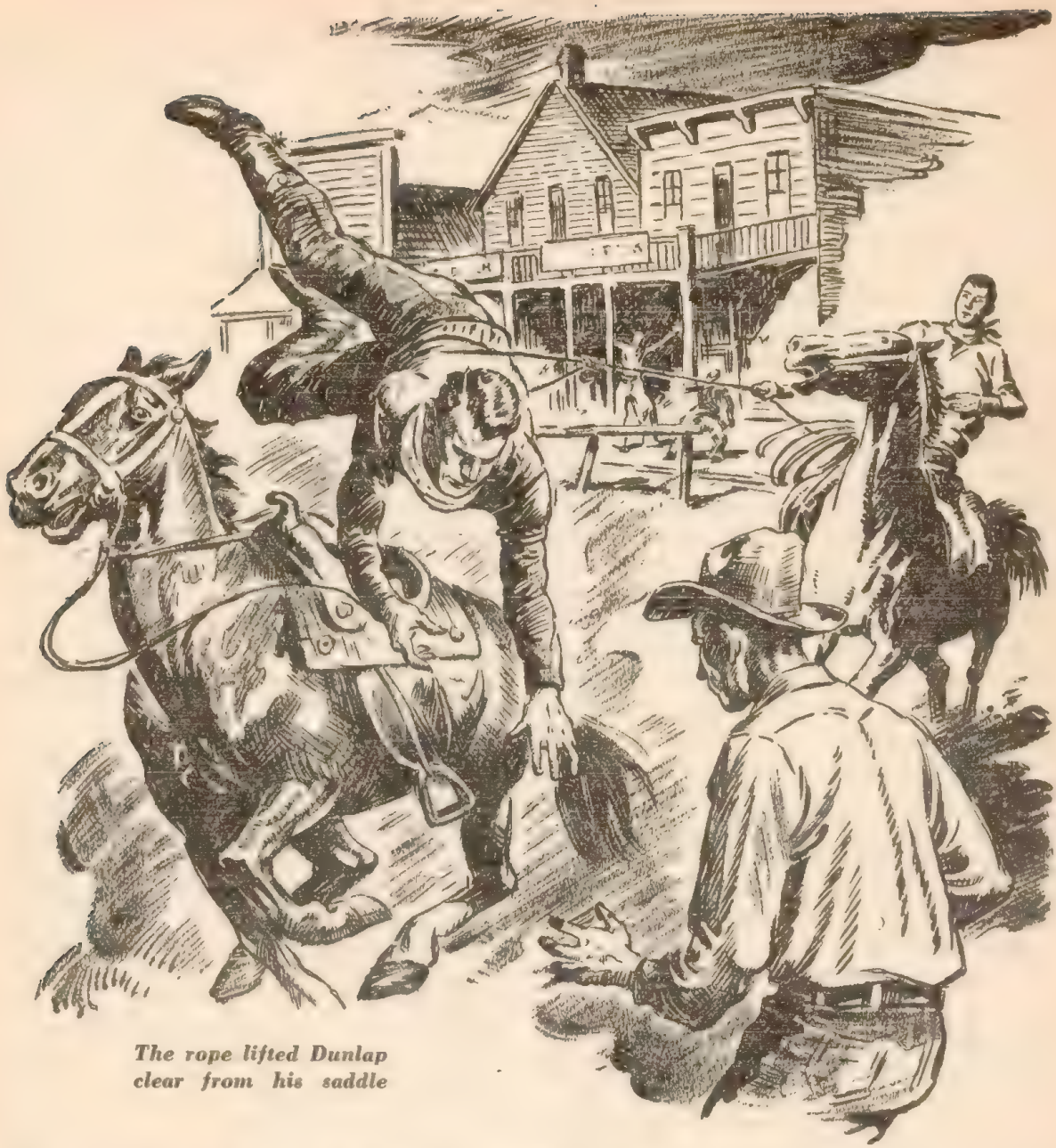
Jake pulls through O.K. but he's still just sittin' up in bed one day that I'm there when the Warden comes to see 'im. The Warden walks in and asks Jake how he's doin'. Jake he's pretty glum and don't say much. Then the Warden pulls a little package from his pocket and says, "Jake, you wanted pretty bad to buy that skinnin' knife I found and since nobody's claimed it after all this time, I've decided to give it to you. I wouldn't feel right sellin' it."

Jake doesn't say much. I guess he's reflectin' just how bad a beatin' he's taken. The Warden starts to leave. In the door he turns and gives Jake somethin' else to think about. "By the way," he says, "I heard what made you sick, Jake. You shouldn't a run like that. I was huntin' myself. You see, the goose season opened that mornin'. Next time you'd better check your game laws before gettin' wet."

In a couple of weeks Jake was back at work on his farm and just learnin' to laugh a little bit at the things that'd happened to him.

I was up talkin' to him one day and out of a clear sky he says, "You know, I don't see much sense to this poachin'. I been keepin' myself and the Warden both run down, and I can't see that it's gettin' me anywhere. I don't believe I'll do it no more."

Well I see by this that he's makin' this change just as he's made a lot of others—when he bumps his head against 'em. I see that now he's makin' a point o' honor out of not poachin'. I lived around him a good many years after that and I never heard of him breakin' the game laws again. Sure funny how a feller will change.



The rope lifted Dunlap clear from his saddle

THE LONG ROPE

By FRED DELANO

AS I look back, it seems that at least half my youthful education consisted of a series of "don'ts." My father often said to me, "Terry Sharp, don't you never go off half-cocked about nothin'—especially people. You can't tell by lookin' at a frog how far he'll leap. You got to punch 'im first."

That particular "don't" was drilled into me until I almost believed jumping to con-

You can't tell how a youngster like Johnny will bust loose!

clusions was a kind of mortal sin. With that sort of early training you'd likely expect me to be pretty open-minded about things now, and I am. But sometimes it's a hard tussle to stay that way and there's a limit to what I can stand. I always figured enough is aplenty of anything—like in the case of Johnny Woods, for example.

That deal began down in the Grass Range country one spring in late May. I'd been in there and bought a lot of mixed cattle—about seven hundred head—and was aiming to move them to my K V spread on Willard Creek in Meagher County. The grass had a good start and it looked like we'd make that two-hundred-mule drive in a little less than nothing flat. But Mother Nature cut in for a hand and slowed us down some.

You see, most of the she stuff was heavy with calf and the excitement of the drive touched off the fireworks. Before we'd been on trail two hours we had a couple of cows down in the drag—like when they multiply. But we made ten miles the first day and I was tickled pink.

When we made camp that evening, I squatted myself on the doubletree of the bed wagon and shook out a Billings paper one of the boys had brought from town the night before, intending to kill a few minutes till grub was ready. On the front page of that paper I found some news that made me sit right up and take notice.

WESLEY BELL, a man I'd punched cows with twenty years before, had been shot on his ranch near Miles City by a fellow who'd robbed a store at that place, tied up the manager and a clerk, and got away. Bell, hearing about the holdup over the ranch phone, saw a stranger cutting through his place and heading for the hills, so Bell went after him to ask a few questions. It must have been the holdup man, for Bell was shot bad and left lying on the prairie. After four days, the paper said, Bell was still in a coma. No one had a good description of the gunman, and of course Bell couldn't talk. The man had been masked, the storekeeper said, and was sort of slim, but otherwise just about average.

That was sure tough news, because I liked old Wes a lot. I'd started to read the story over again when I heard a thumping shuffle and a jingle of spurs and this Johnny Woods rode into camp. He was pushing along on a rangy gray that was blackened with sweat and so gaunted up it looked as if it had been jerked through a knothole.

When the rider got close enough, I saw he was only a kid, maybe about sixteen or so. His eyes was blue and his hair a sheep-dip brown and he was thin and gawky and not overly tall. His boots were badly worn, his hat was rusty, and it looked like he hadn't been out of his duds for quite a spell. His riding gear included a well-used maguey throw rope, a slicker, and a cartridge belt holding a six-gun buckled to the left side of the saddle fork. Hauling up where I was, he sat there, leaning on the saddlehorn and looking at me, tight-eyed, and I kept looking back, wondering what was up.

After a bit he said: "Howdy."

I said: "Howdy," and nodded to him and folded my paper.

"How about staying tonight?" he asked. "My horse is nearly tuckered."

I'd been expecting something like that, so I snapped my reading specs in their case and said: "Sure. There's oats for your horse in the back of the wagon, and cookie'll have grub in a few minutes."

He said: "Thanks," and dropped off in that loose-limber way kids have before their bones get set proper.

He didn't seem to move fast, but in less than a minute he'd unsaddled and fed his nag. Then he come back and squatted on his heels. I waited for him to open up, but he didn't.

Then I said: "Well, you got a name, kid?"

"Sure enough," he said. "I'm John Woods—from down Wyoming way."

"Looks like you been riding pretty hard," I said.

"Sure enough," he said, and then closed up tight.

I'd also noticed that when he unsaddled he'd buckled that gun belt around his hips. I couldn't see that the gun made him look very ferocious, but, I thought, you never can tell in what way a youngster like him is

liable to bust loose.

About that time, cookie yelled: "Grub-pile! Come'n get it!" and I threw that folded newspaper up on the wagon seat and went to take on a bait of beans and bacon.

After supper, Johnny Woods hung around a while; and then he saddled his gray and rode out to where Ed Padgett was holding the horses and Ed come in for grub.

"Did you send that kid out there, Terry?" Ed asked.

"Nope," I said. "Trumpet was going to relieve you in a minute. But the kid's staying tonight and likely wants to earn his keep."

I climbed up on the bed wagon to look for that Billings paper, intending to show that Wes Bell story to old Ed and to Vince Mueller because they had both known Bell, but the paper was gone.

"Did any of you fellows get a newspaper out of this wagon seat?" I yelled.

NO ONE had. I searched for it a while longer and then gave up. I set there on the wagon, disappointed about the paper, and suddenly I began watching Johnny Woods. He was riding around among the horses, spooking them, and making them move around, like he was trying to decide which one was the best. I sure didn't like the way that boy was acting; I figured, come morning, he would be gone and we would be short one horse.

But my worry was needless. At daylight, the Woods kid rolled out of the soogans I'd staked him to, and I was a little ashamed of myself for thinking about him the way I had. After breakfast, he roped out his own horse and come around to where I was hooking up one of the teams.

After watching me a bit, he said: "Say, how about a job, Mr. Sharp? I'd kind of like to hang around a spell."

I finished snapping up the neckyoke before answering. I had a full crew, but I'd handled enough men to know how undependable some of them can be, and I wasn't banking very heavy on Len Dunlap, a new man I'd taken on the day before. I also thought of the rough country beyond the Judith Basin and didn't know how things would work out there. And then I've always had a soft spot for kids, especially like this Johnny Woods, out looking for a job of work for the first time, and maybe not having much luck finding it. But on top of all that, the way he had hit camp with his horse fagged out from hard riding—and right on the heels of that bad news about Wes Bell—had me mighty curious. Of course it could have been only a coincidence, but the thing fit together so perfectly— But I tried not to think of that.

"Can you ride?" I asked.

"Sure enough," he said, cool as a whetstone. "Anything you got in this outfit."

Now, that "sure enough" of his already had my teeth on edge, and then the way he said "this outfit" cooked me good, but I tried not to show it. Maybe I was too touchy.

"You're hired," I said, and let the team stand while I picked out a string of ponies for him.

After that I went back to the wagon, and right there I found the missing newspaper. It was tramped into the sagebrush by a hind wheel, and when I picked it up I saw the story of the Bell shooting had been torn out. I was considerable puzzled, because I couldn't think who else in the outfit besides Ed and Vince was interested in Wes Bell, and I knew they hadn't seen the paper. I scratched my head and stuck the paper under the seat blanket and got on the wagon.

Well, we had a ten-mile start, and everything rolled along fine in spite of the new calves that was coming.

For the next few days, I kept watching Johnny Woods and studying him. If I'd been trying to fault the kid I'd have been disappointed, for I never got a chance. The first time he had to uncork a tight horse, I found he could ride plenty good. He was always in the right place at the right time, and he had the proper push and go to make a top cowhand.

But it wasn't long before he struck up a friendship with Len Dunlap and I didn't like that a little bit, mostly because I didn't like Dunlap. He said he was from Texas, but he didn't look like a Texan and he sure didn't talk like one and he was always looking for

some way to keep out of work.

All this time I kept thinking about Wes Bell and about how Johnny had looked when he rode into camp that evening, and those things worried me because I was beginning to think a lot of that kid. One night when we was setting around the fire after supper I tried to draw him out.

"What part of Wyoming you from, Johnny?" I asked him.

"Oh," he said. "I've rode here and there some."

"Big Horn basin?" I said, because I knowed something about that part and thought I might trip him up if he was lying.

"Went through there once," he said vaguely.

"Where you going when you get through with this job?"

HE LOOKED me over good before answering that one. "It's a big country, Mr. Sharp," he said. "You got any suggestions?"

I didn't like the way he kept heading me, and I was tempted to suggest a place where he could go that would suit me fine. But then something happened.

He pulled a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket to roll a smoke and a folded piece of newspaper fell down on the ground. He didn't notice that, so I picked it up and I'll be darned if it wasn't the story of the Wes Bell shooting that had been torn from my Billings paper.

I folded it up and handed it back to him. "This fell out of your pocket," I said.

He grabbed for it quick. "Sure enough," he said. And then he tore the paper up and dropped the pieces in the fire.

"Couldn't have been very important," I said, still trying to get him to talk.

But Johnny Woods didn't answer. He got up and went to his bed without a word. I threw another stick on the fire and sat there some more. Now, I thought, why should he want to get that story out of circulation? I didn't want to wrongfully suspect anyone, but I was facing some pretty strong facts. He did carry a gun; he had come from the general direction of Miles City; and his arrival at our camp was in logical sequence to the Bell shooting. I had a sudden notion that when we got home, I'd have Hugh Grossett, our sheriff, pick him up for questioning. On the other hand, he was quiet, hard-working, and—well, he was just a kid, and it would take more than what I'd seen so far to make me class him as a gunman. I gave up and rolled into bed.

The June rains hit us hard, and the next day the cattle streamed into Yogo basin in a slashing downpour with night crowding the drag. Old Ed Padgett slogged through the wet grass to where I was helping pitch the cook tent.

"Terry," he said, "I been thinking all week about that Bell business, and I be darned if it don't look to me like this Johnny kid might have had something to do with it. You know how he—"

"Rats!" I cut in, but Ed's idea was so near like mine it made me uneasy. "He wouldn't do a thing like that, Ed," I told him. "He's a quiet, pleasant-spoke boy, if there ever was one."

"So was Billy the Kid," he reminded me.

I dumped out a sack of tent pegs and glared at him. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size," I asked him, "or else go fall in the river."

"Couldn't get much wetter if I did," he said, digging in the bed wagon for some dry cook wood he'd cached under the tarp. "With this rain, we might all drown in it tomorrow."

"We're holing up here till we have a look at it," I said. "I'll have Vince do a little scouting in the morning—him and Harry."

Well, Mueller and Trumpet come back with a report of high water, but knowing it was mostly quick run-off I held the drive on Yogo Creek until the river could shape up better. Between showers, the crew spent their time drying out beds in the hot sun, cleaning riding gear, and resting.

On the morning of the second day, Len Dunlap asked permission to ride back to Utica for some things he needed and I told him it was all right. But when Johnny heard Len was going to town he come to me and drew five dollars on his wages and saddled his gray and went along. I hated to see him leave with Dunlap, but there was nothing

I could do about it. Besides, I was getting sick of the whole mess and glad to get rid of them both for a day.

THEY got back to camp after dark. Dunlap was sick-drunk and the kid was carrying a gunny-sack full of beer. None of us had rolled in yet, and when I heard Dunlap giving up in the grass I come out of the bed tent in a hurry.

"Dunlap," I said, "you know my rules about drinking on the job. For two bits—"

But I saw he was too sick to reason with and I turned on Johnny Woods. "You shouldn't have brought that beer to camp, son," I said, trying to soften up a little.

"Sure enough," Johnny said, acting tough. "Bust the beer if you want to, but you lay off of Len. He's my buddy."

That's all it took to dry up my milk of human kindness. "If you wasn't a kid," I snapped, "I'd bust the beer over your skull. And if it wouldn't leave me short-handed, I'd fire you both, right here and now. Go on to bed, and don't give me any more of your lip or I might change my mind."

Johnny went to bed. I turned around, and Ed Padgett and Harry Trumpet was standthere in the light from the bed tent lantern.

"Just a quiet, pleasant-spoke boy, Terry," Ed grinned. "Yes, sir, he sure is!"

"Oh, shut up!" I yelled. It seemed like every time I'd get to thinking good about Johnny, why then he'd trip me up and I'd feel like kicking his pants. I used the ax on the beer, and I guess I hit it harder than was necessary.

The next morning, we moved into the mountains, through heat, brush, and mosquitoes, needle-nosed deer flies and timber. The way that river wound around we sometimes had to cross it three, four times to the mile. We carried calves on our shoulders and in front of our saddles. We tailed them, towed them, and hauled them in the wagons, often back-tracking for miles to recover some that had been swept downstream.

Busy as I was, I couldn't forget the way Dunlap and Johnny had acted the night before, and the more I thought about it the madder I got. Them too had been riding point—the easiest job in a country like that—and I decided to change things a bit. At Harrison creek forks, I called Ed Padgett.

When the old man rode up, I said to him: "Ed, you and Harry ride point the rest of the way. Send Johnny and Len back here."

"This is pretty heavy for a kid, Terry," he objected.

"They need a good sweat-out," I said. "Send 'em back."

They got their sweat-out all right, and I suffered a twinge every time I'd see the kid wrestling with a calf that was too big for him and sometimes nearly on his knees from exhaustion. But then I'd think of that beer and his smart mouth and Wes Bell and all the other things that nettled me, and then my conscience didn't hurt so bad.

It was all bone-breaking labor, and everyone was snappish and cussing the cattle business the way cowboys will when they're uncomfortable, while at the same time they wouldn't work at anything else if they had the chance.

The night we topped the Little Belt range, I eliminated the night guard by throwing the herd into the big ranger station pasture, and we slept in one of the ranger cabins. For the first time in weeks we had a real roof over our heads, and it was raining again.

"A man's mighty dumb to spend all his life twisting cow tails," Dunlap said, when he was rolling out his bed. "There's easier ways than this to make a living."

"Easiest way I know to make money is to work for it," Harry Trumpet said.

"Rats!" Johnny said. "Why work hard for dough when there's gobs of it laying around just waiting to be picked up?"

"You mean—like taking a bank or something?" Dunlap asked.

"Sure enough."

"And then be on the dodge, with the law panting down your shirt collar," Padgett said. "No, thanks! I'd rather dodge the boss and collect on payday. It's safer."

BUT the kid only gave a contemptuous sniff, and Dunlap laughed.

"The law ain't so hard to lose," Dunlap snorted. "Why, the dumb stars in this country couldn't catch a one-legged cat in a rain-barrel. Right, Mr. Woods?"

"Sure enough, Mr. Dunlap," Johnny said.

I groaned. That kind of talk was bad and, coming from a kid like Johnny, it seemed worse. It looked like Ed might be right about the boy after all, and it was sure for certain that palling around with Dunlap hadn't done him any good. I squirmed down in my damp blankets and tried to concentrate on the patter of rain outside, and on the fact that with fair luck we'd be home in a couple of days. But the voices droned on, and when I finally dozed off Johnny was still holding first place in the conversation.

We pulled into the home ranch about four o'clock the second afternoon, and after six weeks of hard work and trouble I was sure glad to get back. Millie, my wife, was twice as beautiful as I'd remembered her being, but there were only a few weeks to renew our acquaintance before calf round-up took me and the crew away again.

The next morning, I paid off Dunlap and Johnny Woods; and after that they roped out their horses and rode off toward town. I wasn't satisfied about that kid, and the way Ed Padgett kept pecking away at me about him didn't help matters any, so after a couple of days I decided to take Millie and drive into town myself. I didn't have anything in mind except maybe that hazy idea of having Hugh Grossett pick Johnny up for questioning, if the kid was still around town. I was sure hoping he would be.

We got in about 10 o'clock, and I went straight to the depot and sent a wire to Miles City, inquiring about Wes Bell's condition. After that, I dropped into Grossett's office, but Hugh was out, so I headed for the Big Ditch saloon. It was named that because it was where all the cowpunchers landed when they fell off the wagon on payday. Me, why, I thought Hugh Grossett might be there, of course.

On the way to the Big Ditch, I ran into Len Dunlap and Johnny Woods, and I hardly recognized the kid. He was wearing a new hat and new boots and had got himself a haircut and a shave. It made a lot of difference—gave him a sort of clean, hard, gritty look. I sized the two up for signs of drinking, but they was both dry as a couple of grasshoppers in August.

"Hi-yah, Mr. Sharp," Johnny said, hauling up.

"Hello, Johnny—hello, Len," I said, not too cordial. "I figured you two would be a hundred miles from here by now."

"We had to take in the bright lights first," Johnny said, "but we're dragging out pretty soon."

Dunlap mumbled something and nudged Johnny with his shoulder. Then he walked on up the street. After holding tight rein for a bit the kid went after him.

Hugh Grossett wasn't at the Big Ditch, but some of my old friends was, and I let the Johnny Woods matter rest while we dampened down a lot of gab with Ditch water. After I'd bragged about the good drive I'd made and finally got my mind emptied of gossip, I looked at the clock and saw it was near noon. I thought of that wire I'd sent, so I pulled myself out of the Ditch and went back to the depot.

There was an answer to my telegram. It said Wes Bell was recovering from the gunshot wound, but that there was still no trace of the fugitive. I read the message over twice and stuck it in my shirt pocket, right pleased to know old Wes was going to be all right. And then I went back out of the depot, determined to find Sheriff Grossett and get some sort of action on this Johnny Woods. For my own peace of mind, I had to know the truth, one way or another.

WHEN I come out on the platform, I saw Dunlap and the kid riding down the center of the main street, and there was something funny about the way they acted. They both wore guns and were grim and wary as a couple of wolves riding circle on a strychnine bait. Right then, a queer feeling stabbed through my belly. Once—years previous—I'd felt like that just before a bolt of lightning knocked my horse from under me.

I got my legs moving a little faster and when I reached the street Johnny and Dunlap had stopped in front of the bank, about two blocks down. Dunlap was inside and the kid was holding his horse and the situation sure didn't look a bit good. Ed had been right, and I had held out too long with-

out doing anything, and right there the whole thing collapsed in my face and I wasn't open-minded about that kid any longer. Of course he was the one who had punctured old Wes, and— Well, I really got mad then and I started on a trot for the bank, intending to break up whatever game them two was playing.

But before I got halfway there, Dunlap come running from the bank with a bag in his hands and got on his horse. He and the kid wheeled around and started to ride back up the street toward me, and toward the Castle Butte country beyond the depot. But some nervous fit hit Dunlap and he lost his self-control. He kicked his horse into a run and come boiling up the street with Johnny Woods fogging along behind. I stopped in my tracks. The whole thing was out of control and there wasn't a thing I could do.

Then something happened. Johnny Woods took down his throw rope; he spun a loop with a snappy flourish; and then with a single back-hand swing, like he was throwing a rock, he hung that rope on Dunlap, tight and neat and just below the shoulders. Johnny's gray put on the brakes and plowed the dust, and since there was no give to that rope it lifted Dunlap from the saddle and slammed him flat on his back in the middle of the street and right opposite me.

About that time, excited people was coming from the bank, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Hugh Grossett step from the Big Ditch. He hesitated a second and then come running up the street to see what the trouble was, and I went out and sat on Dunlap until Sheriff Grossett could get there.

"What's the rip, Terry?" Grossett panted.

"Now, it looks like there's been a bank holdup," I told him, and I guess he wasn't any more surprised than me. "You better hogtie this one. I'll take care of the kid."

Grossett pulled Dunlap's hands around and snapped on a pair of handcuffs; and after that I saw him pick up the brown canvas bag of currency Dunlap had got from the bank. And then Johnny Woods come up, taking his rope from Dunlap and winding it. When he had finished with the rope, he looked at me slantways. "Mr. Sharp," he said, "I reckon I got to explain."

"Now, I'd appreciate that," I told him.

"Well," he said, "my name ain't Woods like I told you. I'm John Bell—Wesley Bell's boy. I heard you and Ed talking about Dad one day, so you know how he was shot."

"Why, sure, you're Wes Bell's boy," I said, like I had knowed it all the time.

"Well, when I found Dad hurt like that I wanted to stay with him," Johnny told me, "but all the sign there was to tell who shot him was some tracks made by a horse wearing a bar shoe on the right front foot, and I couldn't let that trail fade out on me. So, in one way or another, I followed that horse until I found him in your remuda. He belonged to Len Dunlap."

NOW some light was beginning to seep into my brain. "I saw you looking the horse over. Why didn't you tell me?"

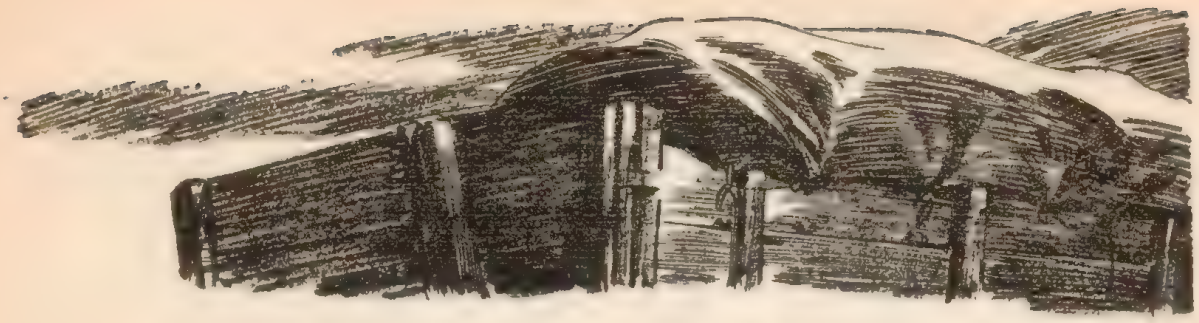
Johnny wiggled one shoulder. "A horse track that's been blowed out and rained out ain't much good. I had to find something else to cinch him with. I thought he'd get away from me that time he got drunk in Utica or I wouldn't have gone along. All I could do was encourage him a little and give him some more rope, thinking if I gave him enough maybe he'd hang himself, so I gave him all I had and—well, there he is."

I nodded dumbly. Yes, sir, he was right there, no fooling. "Son," I said, "I got a telegram from Miles City that says your dad's getting along fine."

What hit me hardest, right square between the eyes, was the whale of a job Johnny had done—and him just a kid who was likely lonesome and homesick and stuck with a man-sized problem and maybe a little afraid the whole thing would be too much for him at last. But the part that hurt me most was that I had jumped to conclusions about something I didn't understand at all.

Johnny turned his head; he rubbed his nose with his hand and made a kind of whimpering sound. I put my arm around his shoulders and then his shoulders began to shake and I saw he was sobbing. He sniffed and said: "Is Dad going to be all right, Mr. Sharp, sure enough?"

"Sure enough, Johnny Bell," I said. "Sure enough." • • •



A Novelet by AL STORM

CHAPTER I

Santa Fé Bound

MAUVE grayish half-light of dawn bathed the tops of the freight wagons and the man who was sprawled near the wagons on his back, with his shirt front heavy with crimson. Already sand flies were swarming over the gory patch that should have been a scalplock, and about the small blackish pool of life's blood that had settled on the tarred tarpaulin that covered the flat topped wagon.

Across the plains to Santa Fé, the caravan moved on with hidden treachery as cargo!

Train Captain Jed Longine scraped his whiskered jaw with a blunt thumbnail, weighted down with apprehension. He lifted a quick meaningful glance toward the bland, leathered countenance of Parson Crow, the preacher-turned-frontiersman who was the wagon train's chief scout. Parson Crow said nothing, but Longine saw the scout's slate eyes were contracted to fine slits, and he knew that the canny old scout's conclusion coincided with his own.

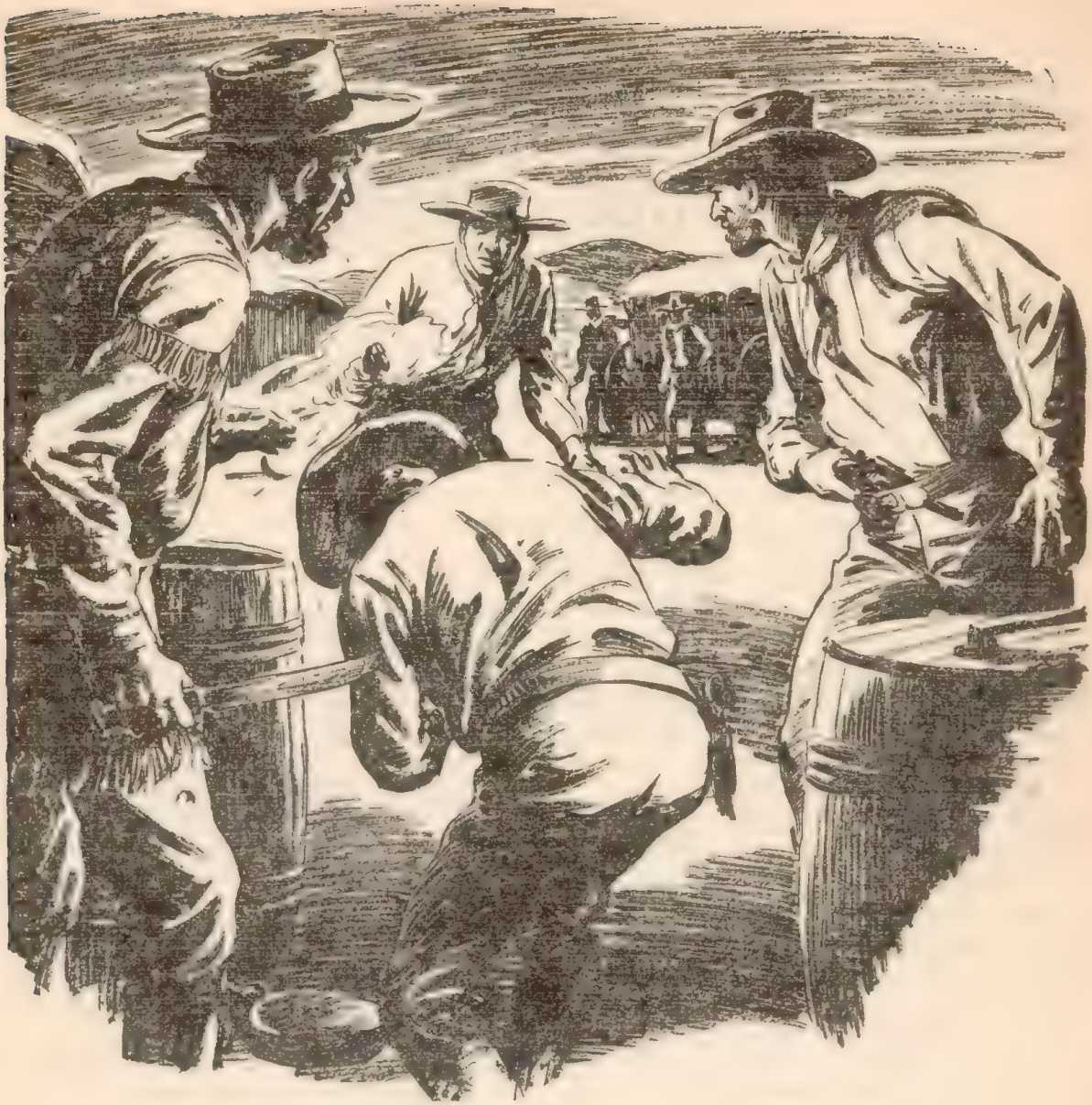
"The Comanches sure caught Hank Withers napping," Jed Longine said slowly.

He lifted his tones, making them purposefully loud so that they would ring and carry through the thiry-odd men bunched about the freight wagon. As though in confirmation of some inward observation, he nodded and then stepped down from the high front wheel.

The owner of the freight wagon train was there, Rocketon Jamestón, and his daughter, Lucia. Longine noted that the girl had dressed hastily, neglecting fully to button the mannish shirt she wore. His glance inadvertently touched the open V with its exposed swells of rounded flesh. He wrenched his eyes away, but not before the woman felt the impact of his gaze and lifted a hand to fasten the errant button, slight embarrassment crossing her features.

Concealing his confusion, Jed Longine said bluntly: "It isn't pretty, Rock. You'd better keep Lucia from seeing."

Rocketon Jameston's features grew stern. Briefly he studied his train captain's face, then nodded.



Parson Crow's fist closed about the haft of the butcher knife

"Come, Lucia," he said. "We'll go back to our wagon."

The girl turned away, and Jed Longine looked away, careful lest his glance follow her.

"Anything I can do, Longine?" Herschel Mink spoke up.

LONGINE bottled the smoking retort that sprang to his throat. He shook his head, watching as the trim, carefully shaved Herschel Mink hurried away to join Rock and Lucia Jameston.

Parson Crow dropped lithely from the high side of the wagon. Jed Longine didn't

turn. He felt the old scout's fringed elkskin sleeve brush his back.

"Get a grave dug," Longine directed brusquely. "And every man take a good look at Hank Withers when you lower him in. A nap in this country sometimes lasts for all eternity."

Harsh and brutal as the words were, they weren't half what Jed Longine wanted to shout out. The peril that had claimed Hank Withers overhung the whole train. But he dared not put his apprehension into plain words. How could a man voice a vague hunch, mere suspicion aloud? He couldn't just yell, "Herschel Mink's bunch didn't join this train at Council Grove for any good! They aren't the greenies they pretend to be! They're dangerous! They're—" But without proof, without anything more definite than a frontiersman's deep-seated hunch, what could he say?

"Reckon it was Comanches then?" a man asked; and Jed Longine saw that Mink's wagon boss, Curley Shepherd, had joined the crowd.

"You know anybody else with reason to scalp Hank Withers?" Longine said.

Shepherd, a tall, sparse fleshed man, shrugged. And, as always, Jed Longine felt the biting certainty that Shepherd was laughing, that some furtive and hidden mirth was crinkling those narrow, fawn-colored eyes. The train captain turned away with a sharpening self-disgust.

Rocky Jameston was waiting beside his lead wagon, and he fell into step with Jed Longine and Parson Crow. Worry furrowed the man's brow.

Billings-Jameston, the legend read on thirty of the thirty-six heavy, travel-seared freight wagons that made up the train. None of your picturesque prairie galleons these, with arched domes of gleaming canvas. Flat, sturdy, dirty gray wagons, high sided, full loaded and lashed tight, that was the freight wagon of the Santa Fe trail. And these but a fraction of the many such trains that Billings-Jameston sent annually through the parched hell of the "Crossing."

But never before had Rocketon Jameston made a crossing, nor his daughter, Lucia, for that matter. The added responsibility riding Jed Longine's shoulders was made none the lighter by thought of Lucia Jameston's flashing blue eyes when she chided him for his taciturn sobriety.

Oddly, it was of her he thought now as he walked. For the turn of full twenty rods no man spoke. Then Jameston said:

"Poor Hank. Been with us four years. A good driver, Hank Withers, always dependable." Jameston shuddered. "Why, those Comanches might have knifed Lucy or—"

Jed Longine turned, and his jaw was knotted with the emotion boiling within him.

"No Comanche would knife a man and then drag him on top a wagon to do the scalping," he said flatly. "That was a white man's trick—aimin' to make us think it was Comanches."

Jameston's jaw dropped and he paled. "You—you're sure, Jed?"

Old Parson Crow tapped his palm against the black haft of his butcher knife. "Sign's plain as the tablets of Sinai. And for a pup, Jed can read sign."

The old scout's verification of Longine's suspicions settled any doubt Rock Jameston may have had. He stared back along the freight wagons that made side to the rectangular corral.

"It's none of my business and I've never asked," Jed Longine went on. "But if you've got anything unusual in that freight load, you'd better check it. Somebody was unleasing the tarp. Maybe Hank stopped them, maybe not."

JAMESTON gave no evidence of having heard. For a long moment Longine watched the man's struggle for decision, seeing the groping for words and the reluctance to impart whatever knowledge he held in secret.

The sun was already a fine gold disk on the eastern horizon. The prairies were shimmering with light. The freight wagons were still boxed in their tight rectangular corral instead of lined out and rolling toward the tradesman's Mecca to the southwest.

Eleven days out of Independence and already one man dead; and ahead—Longine scowled and rubbed his jaw with his thumb nail.

"You figure maybe Mink's men might have something to do with it?" Jameston queried.

Longine faced him squarely, venting his suspicions with blunt hard talk.

"He claims to be a greenie whose guide didn't show up," Longine said harshly. "He knew that trail custom would force you to let him join up with us. But if he's a greenie, I'm a winged centipede. And Curley Shepherd has bedded along this trail before, too."

Jamestown gnawed at his lower lip, a haggard uncertainty growing in his eyes.

"It's supposed to be secret," Jameston said, almost whispering there in the clear light of the flatland's dawn. "I'm taking equipment to outfit a battalion of men the Army is sending down through Colorado. On June seventh, they will be two days travel north of Santa Fe. I'm to meet them then."

Parson Crow spat into the short spring-greening grass with a start of wonderment. Jed Longine held his own stern composure in tight check.

"That battalion is going through to California," Jameston continued. "But the Mexican authorities at Santa Fe mustn't know of it until the battalion has outfitted and gone. It would mean war sure. That battalion can't linger there. If I'm not at the rendezvous—"

Jameston fell silent, but Longine could well imagine the plight of soldiery attempting the hazardous march without equipment. Frontiersmen, mountain men, wilderness trappers, yes; but soldiers—no.

"No reason why we can't make it in time," Jed Longine said.

But his unease was a mounting pressure. Any one of a hundred trail accidents could delay them; any number of measures a ruthless man could employ which would stop the train dead for untold numbers of days. He rubbed his jaw with his thumb and squinted back along the corralled wagons to where Herschel Mink's six freighters boxed in the far end.

"We'll get there, Rock," he promised grimly. "Don't worry."

Rocketon Jameston himself read the brief passage over Hank Withers' grave. The unmarked hole was filled in, and Jed Longine directed the herd of wagon stock be driven back and forth over it until no trace of fresh turned earth remained.

He saw Lucia Jameston watching him. She had been crying. Her eyes were still red. And he saw that Herschel Mink was close beside her, standing between girl and her father.

"A man must be all iron and no feelings to survive out here," Herschel Mink called out.

Longine scowled, studying the comment but unable to read censure or mockery into the words.

"Starting now," he said bluntly, "every man will stay by his own wagon when we corral. Any man prowling without good reason will have some explaining to do."

He sent the challenge at Mink and, for a fraction of a second, saw the mocking good-humor slip. Mink's lips tightened. Then he was saying:

"A good idea, Longine. Let every man be responsible for his own wagon."

Longine spurred away, feeling the inadequacy of his showing. But now was not the time to brace the man.

"Roll on," he yelled out, sounding an order that was taken up by the thirty Billings-Jameston teamsters. "Roll on to Santa Fe!"

THE rectangle was broken as the two long sides drove straight ahead, the end wagons falling in with either line. The sun was already high, and Longine watched the two parallel lines of wagons begin the day's drive.

Rock Jameston's words were on his mind and he studied the far reaching emptiness of the lower grasslands with careful scrutiny. He knew little of politics, caring little for the whys and wherefors of chicanery that marked society east of the mighty river. But the delicacy of relations with the volatile Mexican authorities was close to him, as it was with any man who lived by trade and the "Crossing." And well he knew the sacred reverence with which the Mexicans regarded California. A battalion of Yankee soldiers headed there—all of northern Mexi-

co would rally and the frontier would flame. Commerce would be smashed. Scowling uneasily, Jed Longine sent his mount lunging along the wagon train until he came abreast the lead wagon where Rock Jameston and Lucia rode.

"No nooner, Rock," he called out. "We'll do our siesta-ing after we get to Santa Fe."

Lucia Jameston looked at him with an inviting half-smile, but remembering that the same smile had favored Herschel Mink, Longine reined away with a curt nod.

CHAPTER II

Murder in Camp

N THROUGH the noon hour they rolled. The grasslands lay swathed in heat, putting a sheen of sweat on the horses, bringing thirst and discomfort to men's throats. Longine ranged out, watching for sign of Parson Crow or the two guards the old scout had taken with him. But Crow and his men had been swallowed in the vast, endless plains.

Turning, Longine saw Herschel Mink and Curley Shepherd spurring up along the wagon train. He put his own horse to running and cut in ahead of them.

"Aren't we stopping for noon rest?" Herschel Mink questioned. "My teams are getting tired. We'd make it up in faster pulling if we laid off for an hour now."

Longine was curt. "Drop back any time you like, Mink. But we're pulling on through till sunset."

Mink was studying him steadily, temper bright and sharp in his eyes. Longine felt the man's animosity and drifted his hand closer to the heavy pistol thrust through his belt. Curley Shepherd crowded his horse half a step ahead of Mink's.

"Why the chip on your shoulder, Longine?" Shepherd mocked. "We done something you don't like?"

The arrogance was close to the surface, in shocking contrast to Mink's ingratiating humility. Jed Longine shrugged, holding his tongue and waiting for either of the men to indicate their course. A .53 caliber pistol was thrust through Shepherd's belt; a long sheath knife lay against his left thigh, and both showed signs of use.

"Maybe Mr. Jameston had something to say about this," Mink said softly. "Nothing personal, understand. But wearing out teams this early in the crossing isn't a wise thing, Longine."

They crowded past him, then, riding up abreast the lead wagon. Longine watched as Herschel Mink slipped lithely from saddle to wagon seat, and he cursed softly. No doubt Lucia Jameston would find such acrobatics thrilling.

Longine rode back along the wagon line, calling to teamsters, watching the horses, checking on the condition of the rolling stock. Then he went up the other line, repeating the performance, and came at last to the lead wagon of the second line, knowing that loss of the nooning rest would have little effect on the train.

Sixty feet away, Herschel Mink was chatting with Lucia Jameston, his teeth flashing white as he laughed. Rock Jameston was spelling the driver, handling the reins himself. Longine could see the surly scowl that marked Rock's countenance. Curley Shepherd had dropped back to the Mink wagons which brought up the tail end of the train.

The hours settled heavily with their endless monotony of heat, and dust, and never varying grasslands. But with sunset three distant specks came to notice and slowly neared to become Parson Crow and the two men he had taken with him.

One of the men had a fresh-killed antelope across the front of his saddle. Longine waved him on toward the wagons, the second man, too. Then scout and train captain were alone.

"Few Comanche around, keepin' low," Parson Crow reported. "Huntin' wigwam meat and not likely to jump a wagon string."

Jed Longine scraped his jaw, waiting for the old scout to finish. Parson Crow took his time. He shifted in the saddle, scanning the far dim reaches of the horizon. His

glance sifted along the approaching wagon train, and then he turned to Jed Longine.

"Looked it over good," he said. "If any Comanche buck was around that corral last night, he never trod grass for half a mile any direction. But I did find this."

The old scout held out his hand, and Longine saw the hand-sized patch of bloody flesh and hair that had been Hank Withers' scalp-lock.

"Keep quiet about it, Parson," Jed said slowly. "We'll maybe use Hank's hair to bait us a trap."

PARSON CROW spat and rubbed his palm along the grease-shined stock of his old Jake Hawkins rifle.

"Known Hank Withers a long time," he rumbled. "Hank'll rest easier before I'm done with this."

They headed back toward the wagons, then, and Jed Longine angled over to acquaint Rock Jameston with the news of Parson Crow's find.

Jameston listened with set features. His eyes were harried as they scanned the far skyline.

"If I don't make it, Jed," he began soberly—

Jed Longine snorted. But a cool draught played along his spine. Whoever had struck down Hank Withers was ruthless beyond belief. If Herschel Mink, or any one of Mink's men—maybe in pay of Mexico, herself—the next victim might well be Rocketon Jameston. Or Jed Longine.

He kept the wagons rolling, crowding the last fraction of a mile from the fading daylight, and then saw the tight corral take form. Cook fires were kindled within the rectangle, men grazed the mules under the watchful eyes of riflemen. But darkness came down full and black across the prairie without incident; and Jed Longine forcefully reminded each teamster to stay with his wagon—no prowling.

Coyotes took up their eerie laughing chorus. Longine lay fully clothed on a buffalo robe pallet. His rifle lay close to hand. All the many noises of the wagon corral came to him and were unconsciously evaluated on his perception. He heard the sound of boots stepping lightly and he rolled to his feet, coming erect, hand to gun.

"All right," he said sternly. "Where you going this time of night?"

For a moment there was silence. He could make out the black form of the other, but could see nothing else. Noiselessly Jed Longine drew his pistol. He let it clack loudly in going to full cock.

"Quit being so domineering, Jed Longine!" It was Lucia Jameston's voice, sharp edged now. "Mr. Mink didn't want to go against your orders and come up here, so I—"

Jed Longine's voice was flat with jealous fury. "Get back to your wagon! And don't come pussy-footing along here again! If you can't get enough of Herschel Mink during daylight hours, maybe Rock'll let you ride a Mink wagon the rest of the trip!"

The woman gasped; and Longine knew a moment's uncertainty and horror at the insult he had thrown at her. But memory of the bloody patch that had been Hank Withers' scalp came to him, the haggard worry that weighted Rock Jameston, the sly secret mirth of Curley Shepherd.

"Get on back," he repeated. "Let Rock give me orders in the morning and I'll give you free run of this train. But tonight I'm boss."

The woman's voice was scathing. "Yes, Mr. Boss." And she spat an oath at him that set him back on his heels, a phrase that she had obviously heard some teamster use. For a moment he stared blankly after her retreating steps, and then he began to chuckle.

It vented the tension within him, that laughter; and he gave it full swing, laughing until his sides ached and he knew that wonderment would be sweeping the corral.

He took his turn at guard, lying flat on the prairie half a hundred yards out from the wagons. A quiet lay over the land now, a watching hush and he strained to see, to listen, to comprehend the meaningful unease that had hushed the coyotes.

But dawn sent pale streamers across the eastern sky and the wagon train roused to life. Horses were again given their brief grazing before being harnessed.

"Jed! Yaaaooh Jed!"

Jed Longine turned quickly. Far and away to the west a tiny tendril of smoke was climbing. Maybe meaning something, maybe nothing. But he watched it until the yell came again.

Striding back inside the corral, he saw the ring of men. Again! He knew before he drew near enough to see that death had again struck a Jameston man.

ROCK JAMESTON came to meet him, and the man's face was knotted with torment. "Wiley, Jed—Wiley Bush. And this time—"

Jed Longine pushed past Jameston, shouldering through the uneasy, silent circle of teamsters. Parson Crow was on his knees beside the teamster, and he looked up at Jed Longine with a brittle stare.

"Same Comanche as before," he said.

An arrow was driven deep into Wiley Bush's back. A Comanche arrow. But Parson Crow's words had sounded sceptical. Longine raked the watchers with open anger, picking out each Mink man and staring him down in turn.

"Guard must a been asleep," Curley Shepherd said harshly. "Gettin' so a man ain't safe to close his eyes anymore."

Jed Longine twisted on the balls of his feet, hatred bleak and savage in his eyes.

"I was guard on this last trick," he said challengingly.

Curley Shepherd's eyes slanted with amusement. "I know," he said simply. "And sleepin' too, from the looks of it."

Jed Longine's fury snapped. He leaped forward, fist lifting. Curley Shepherd tried to move back, darting a hand toward the heavy pistol in his belt. But the press of onlookers hindered him. Longine's fist spatted against the side of Shepherd's jaw, knocking him aside. Before Shepherd could recover, Jed was lifting his other fist, all the savagery and force of his lean, rawhide shoulders smoking the blow. Curley Shepherd went down spinning.

"Anybody else got anything to say about the way this train is run?" Longine panted harshly.

He glared along the line, making no distinction between his own men and Mink's. He saw the men shift uneasily before his glowering anger.

Rock Jameston held out his hand. "Easy, Jed."

"Easy, hell!" Jed Longine dropped his hand to the heavy pistol in his belt. "We'll get harnessed and going," he said flatly. "We'll take Wiley Bush along and bury him tonight. And the Mink wagons will corral by themselves come sundown!"

He waited for Herschel Mink's protest. But Mink nodded slowly, his smooth face solemn.

"I know it looks bad for me," Mink said. "My men and I are new to you. Search my wagons if you want, talk with any of my men. I'm as anxious to clear my name as you are to find the guilty party."

Jed Longine stiffened. "What guilty party?"

Herschel Mink's smooth handsome face retained its bland innocence. "Why, Lucia, here, told me you suspected a white man had knifed your driver. She said you didn't think it was Comanches at all."

The teamsters swayed and murmured as Mink's revelations touched them. Rock Jameston was scowling.

Jed Longine glared at the woman. "Well, of all the bird-brained—"

Lucia Jameston returned the glare, pride and anger putting a high color into her face.

"Was it a secret, Longine?" she challenged heatedly. "Or were you just guessing so you can keep playing big boss?"

He had to turn away to keep his anger in check. Damn such a woman! He scowled bleakly, knotting his fists while the utter helplessness of his position where she was concerned burned itself deeper and deeper into his mind. Herschel Mink had found the weak link, had cleverly ingratiated himself into Lucia Jameston's good graces. Rock would confide to his daughter secrets no amount of torture would ever get out of him for any man. That well-spring of information Herschel Mink was tapping with his subtle charm.

LONGINE stayed apart while the wagons formed and began rolling. He stayed apart, seething like any school-boy not yet

adjusted to finding himself incapable of meeting every demand put to him. Parson Crow brought his mount, and the two of them spurred westward, saying little, letting the inner fire consume itself and wane.

"A likely filly," Parson Crow said once. "Filled with spirit and fire, a mate to keep a man on his toes."

But Jed Longine's silence quieted him, and the old scout said no more of it. But the observation lay between them, and Longine knew that Parson Crow was aware of the jealousy griping him. The woman's proud hauteur more than Curley Shepherd's accusation writhed and rankled in his soul.

"Never heard a bowstring twang," he mused aloud. "Never heard sound of anything outside the corral."

Parson Crow grunted deep in his corded old throat. "That feller was stabbed with that Comanche arrow—not shot with it. I tried to tell you." The scout twisted in his saddle to stare meaningly at the rear wagons. "He's got six men; there are thirty-four in the Jameston bunch. Why not shake loose from them culls and have done with it?"

The question was not new to Longine's thinking. He had worried the thought for days. But he knew too, that Rock Jameston's reputation was for fairness. Not so long as there was no evidence of Mink's complicity, would he drive Mink's wagons from protection of the main train. In that strength lay its weakness. It was like giving an opponent the first shot, hoping that he would miss.

CHAPTER III

Poisoned Water

HOURS pressed on, and the day ripened. Parson Crow ranged out ahead of the train, hunting fresh meat and keeping canny watch for sign of Comanche war-parties. Jed Longine stayed with the wagon train, feeling a growing tension gnaw at his nerves, a tension of waiting, and watching. He saw Herschel Mink and Lucia Jameston ride out ahead of the wagons and the sight sawed a rawness into his temper.

He kicked his mount around and galloped abreast Jameston's wagon.

"Let's cut loose from Mink," he suggested baldly. "Parson says that arrow was stabbed into Wiley by hand. There's no Comanche buck pullin' stunts like that. There's nobody else in this outfit—"

But Jameston was shaking his head. "First trip for eight Jameston men, Jed," he confessed. "We try to investigate every Billings-Jameston driver. But you know how it is. Any one of them might—" Rock Jameston swore and cuffed at a sandfly with a rocklike fist. "This trip will make or break Billings-Jameston, Jed. Either we deliver the goods or we fall down on the job. And failing will ruin us as far as any future government contracts are concerned, and ruin our Santa Fe trade. No Billings-Jameston wagons would dare venture near Santa Fe should Mexico ever learn about this Army equipment. A lot of our competitors would gladly risk a war to see Billings-Jameston driven out of Santa Fe trade."

Jed Longine's tones were cutting: "Then you won't drive Mink away?"

Jameston's jaw squared and he met his train captain's eyes, matching glare for glare. "No, I won't, Jed Longine. And don't use that tone to me again. By God! I own this train of wagons—"

"And I run them!" Longine blazed. "It's my reputation that will be smeared if you don't get through. And I say—"

"No!" Rock Jameston had reared to his feet. His voice was savage. "No! No man is ever going to say that Rocketon Jameston abandoned him in Comanche country because Rocketon Jameston was afraid."

Longine felt the long muscles bunch and tighten across his shoulders. A mirthless smile curled his lips—and then he caught himself. Fighting with Rock Jameston! He came to full realization of his taut nerves in that moment, saw clearly how close to snapping was Jameston's own frayed composure. He nodded and reined away, saying nothing lest he say more than he could ever recall.

That same icy control still shackled him

when Herschel Mink and Lucia Jameston came riding back to the wagons. Lucia Jameston coldly ignored him, but Mink nodded with a sly smirking triumph ugly in his eyes.

"You'll corral your six wagons outside ours," Longine said flatly. "If there's Comanche trouble, you won't be in any more danger than the rest of us."

Lucia Jameston whirled, but Mink was smiling.

"Of course," Mink said. "I realize your position, Longine."

"Then you realize that this train is going through. Nothing is stopping us short of Santa Fe, savvy!"

Mink's smile grew subtle and mocking. "Of course."

But the train stopped. Rustling around overseeing the pre-dawn harnessing, Longine found a dozen men griped with the pains of dysentery. His lips thinned flat and he swore hoarsely.

"Try and get harnessed," he said. "Those teams will follow the lead wagons once we get lined out."

But his glance scanned the rolling lift of Comanche-country with unfeigned apprehension. Sick men could ride the wagons, depending upon the teams to follow without guidance—but any attack now, any emergency which would demand fast, expert control of the wagon train—

He gouged at his own belly with rough probing fingers. There was no tenderness—yet. But for how long?

He was on foot, hurrying toward the lead wagon when Lucia Jameston crossed to meet him.

"I suppose this is Mink's work, too?" she said harshly. "This sickness. I suppose he's responsible."

HER FACE was pale, lined and drawn with fragile beauty; and Jed Longine reached out to grip her shoulder with gentle fingers.

"Let's not quarrel, Lucia," he begged. "Your father has too much at stake. I've got to fight this through for him."

Her eyes widened slowly at this unexpected vein of softness in him. She smiled soberly, gently, and he saw a strange warmth spread across her face. His fingers tightened. He drew her toward him and she was compliant. But the first touch of their bodies broke the spell and she whirled away from him. He took a step after her, but she was running. He stopped, following her with his eyes until she stepped up into the Jameston wagon.

They broke corral and began rolling, but without the enthusiastic shouting, without the quick expert falling into line of march. Nor was there any of keeping teams pulling even when drivers were too weak to handle the lines. Despite Jed Longine's harried goading, the train stretched loosely.

They stopped for noon rest and Longine faced the fact that he was whipped. More men were down with the scourge of southwestern travel. Rock Jameston called Jed to his wagon.

"It's got me, too, Jed," Rock said. "And Lucia. Probably you and Parson Crow before it's over with. I just wanted you to know that there's no hard feelings. I lost my head, I guess, when I flew off the handle like I did." Then Jameston lifted his head, features set and hard. The peace-making was over.

"Split the train, Jed," Jameston said. "Take every man that isn't sick and get this stuff to that rendezvous. I'll tell you which wagons contain Army shipment."

"And if Comanches should find you this way?" Longine queried bluntly. "There's not a man among you with strength to hold a rifle. How long do you figure you'd last?"

Jameston nodded grimly. "I know, Jed. I'm staying behind. Just take Lucia with you and get going. We—we'll make out." A new argument came to Jameston and he said, "Mink's bunch have escaped it, so far. They'll stay and look after us. You'll be shut of them, like you want. And you'll be looking after Lucy."

Jameston was too weak to continue the argument. He tried to exact a promise, but Longine rode away shaking his head. Abandon half the train? Leave good men to maybe hideous death only because they were weak from sickness? Yet always there was the enticing thought of having Lucia James-

ton with him, under his protection.

He probed his belly muscles countless times in the hours of that long afternoon, but no infection had created its telltale tenderness within him. Longine directed the wagons to corral, giving up all hope of further travel until the sickness had run its course. He saw Herschel Mink ride up to talk with Rock Jameston.

Lucia Jameston's sharp accusation came to Jed Longine's mind as he watched the dapper, lithe-moving Mink. Blame the dysentery on Herschel Mink as Lucia had snapped? He swore feelingly. Of this, at least, Mink stood innocent; and Longine wondered momentarily if Mink was possibly innocent of the other—the two killings. The reflection soured him, but a sense of fairness would not let it die. True, Mink and his crew had escaped the infection, but then so had over half of the Jameston teamsters. And Jed Longine.

Parson Crow would not advise him. "She's your dice to shake and rattle," he said dourly. "Me—I'm watchin' my belly so's I won't get wrung out. When this canteen gets empty, this old beaver is goin' dry."

It took long moments before Jed Longine caught the drift of Parson Crow's suggestion. "Why?" he questioned. "There's a water barrel on every wagon."

"And sick men, too," Parson Crow pointed out. "We shared everythin' else, food and weather, but we drunk our own water. I reckon maybe—"

NEW hope began sprouting in Jed Longine's heart. He stared at the old scout, listening without fully hearing, weaving instead his own pattern of thought.

"Day or day and a half from the Arkansas," he said suddenly. "Was a man to run down there with all the barrels and fetch back clean fresh water."

Parson Crow shook his head. "Comanche were thicker than prairie dogs along that stretch," he said gravely. "A man wouldn't have a show unless he took along twenty men with rifles."

"Then we'll take them," Longine said. "It's a long gamble. But I'm making it."

He crossed the corral to talk the matter over with Rock Jameston. And there he ran into trouble. Rock Jameston was obstinate: Jed Longine would take what wagons he could and drive on toward Santa Fe.

"You'll go, by God!" Jameston shouted. "Or I'll send them on without you! I'll put Herschel Mink in charge and—and—"

"In charge of what, Mr. Jameston?"

Without turning, Jed Longine knew that Herschel Mink had catfooted along the wagons and now stood close behind him. Jameston's jaws clicked shut and he glared helplessly, not yet ready to give full trust to the smiling, humble Herschel Mink.

"I've a barrel of clean water," Jed Longine said. "Every man get a canteen full from me. That'll hold him until I can get back from the Arkansas with fresh water."

"You'll not—" Jameston began.

But Jed Longine ignored him, striding away without looking back.

A lowering sun had spread a sombre red pall across the stricken wagon train. No cook fires smouldered, for no man ate. No horses were loosed to graze, for too few men were on their feet to handle them. Most of the victims were stretched in the shade of their wagons, staring blankly upward with tortured eyes; or they rolled and moaned when the pains griped them.

TYPE-CAST

HORSES can get in a thespian rut too. When six horses taught to rear at the sound of gunfire were ordered for a scene in a new Western movie, which called for actors Kirk Douglas and Jim Anderson to pistol duel inside a barn, somebody slipped up. Came the duel and five horses reared dramatically but—horror of horrors—the sixth laid down. It was learned that he was a "falling" horse, taught to "die" at the sound of gunfire, and had been put into the group by mistake.

—Harold Helfer

As a precautionary measure, Jed Longine had seen to the dumping of all water barrels—even Mink's.

"Just in case," he told the swollen-faced Curley Shepherd. "If your water is contaminated, it'll save you trouble. If not—you're in the same boat as the rest of us."

Curley Shepherd minced forward, walking on his toes, face strained and distorted in the reddish afterglow.

"I'll kill you, Longine," he said in husky tones. "Before God and man, I swear it! I'll kill you if I—"

Longine gripped the worn butt of his own heavy pistol. "Try it, Shepherd!" he challenged. "It's what you've been wanting since we left Council Grove. Now's your chance—try it!"

But Curley Shepherd hesitated, lips curled back in a half-snarl. Slowly, reluctantly, Curley Shepherd turned and walked away. Longine stared after him. Shepherd hadn't been afraid, yet he had held back the wild unholy urge to tangle with the train captain. Why? Scowling, Jed Longine turned away. He saw, then, that Herschel Mink was standing close behind the tail-gate of his big wagon. Mink had been watching, had been able to hear. Now he said nothing, but his eyes were narrowed and he watched until Longine passed from sight.

Parson Crow stood beside the water barrel, mournfully doling out the precious water. Jed Longine was farther away. Slowly, painfully, men staggered to their wagon and presented canteens for filling. Half way across the corral, two wagons were being unloaded and the emptied water barrels stacked in each wagon box. Jed Longine mechanically poked at his belly, seeking the dreaded soreness, while he watched the wagons being readied for the trip to the river.

"Hold on there!"

PARSON CROW'S outraged shout whipped him about. The old scout was gripping a Mink teamster by the collar, dragging him away from the water barrel.

"Let him go, Parson," Longine said. "I dumped Mink's barrels. They need water, too."

But Parson Crow's gnarled old fist had closed about the haft of his butcher knife. He shook the teamster off balance, and flicked the keen blade across the man's head. Blood spurted from a sliced ear. The man screeched with fear.

"Had a full canteen, not an empty one," the old scout raged. "Seen it when he started dippin' into the barrel. I yelled but he dropped it on in." Parson Crow waved the knife a fraction of an inch from the teamster's bulging eyeballs. "Now, ye black imp of Satan!" Crow snarled. "What was in that canteen, and who sent you up here to poison our water?"

The man gibbered in fright and Parson Crow passed the keen blade through the man's other ear. Men mumbled in horror. Even Jed Longine, long calloused to the old scout's ruthless practicability, felt a cold sweat steep his spine. Herschel Mink rounded Jameston's lead wagon. At sight of his teamster in Parson Crow's grip, he started, then began running toward them.

"Longine! What in—" he began.

"Caught this skunk poisoning our water," Parson Crow snarled wickedly. "He's your man, Mink. If he's working under your orders—"

Herschel Mink stopped dead, his face going slowly white. For a long moment he stared at the fear-stricken teamster.

"Don't let them, for God's sake, Mink!" the teamster begged. "I'll— Don't cut me again! I'll confess! I'll tell you what—"

Longine saw the move start, and he tried to yell. But his voice was lost in the sharp blast of Herschel Mink's pistol. The teamster staggered, his jaw dropping to a welter of blood. Mink fired again, face cold and dead, without emotion.

"To think a skunk like that worked for me," he exclaimed. "He'll never trick me again. Never."

Herschel Mink turned toward Longine. "I can't undo the wrong now, Longine," he apologized. "But maybe I've convinced you that I'm as anxious for this train to get safely through to Santa Fe as you are."

"Or maybe you were afraid of what he was going to say?" Jed Longine said bluntly.

But Herschel Mink shook off the rebuff

"I'll prove my side," he said. "I'll send my wagons and my men to the river for water. You can go along or send anybody you want. You can seal the barrels to make sure nobody dumps anything in them during the trip. I'll prove it, understand! I'll show you that Herschel Mink may be a fool but he isn't a crook."

Jed Longine grinned coldly. "Then get them ready, Mink. We'll leave in fifteen minutes. And I'll go along."

Mink nodded and turned away. Only then did Jed Longine notice that Mink still gripped the heavy four-chambered pistol in his fist.

CHAPTER IV

Flick of a Knife

CURLEY SHEPHERD was riding the wagon that came clattering along the corral. He grinned down at Longine, and the sharp sardonic mirth was open and malicious in his eyes.

"Climb in," Shepherd said. "Mink wants this all done up nice."

Longine nodded curtly at Parson Crow and climbed into the wagon. Water barrels were standing thick in the box, clattering and bouncing as Shepherd whipped the team into motion. The two men were alone in the front wagon. Behind came a second wagon, this with four men; one a Mink teamster, the other three trusted Jameston men.

Curley Shepherd glanced at Longine, noting the train captain's quick scrutiny of the second wagon, and Shepherd said, "Not scared, are you?"

Longine snorted. But the unease lay sharp and torturous as a sandburr in his mind. Six men to fight off Comanches! He knew that he should stop right now and bring more Jameston crewmen; but Shepherd's mocking contempt goaded him. One call for more Jameston men, and Shepherd would shake with laughter, and that, Jed Longine swore inwardly, was one relishment he would never grant the Mink-man, not if he had to die for his stubbornness.

The darkness was thick and silent across the vast stretch of open plain. Longine slowly relaxed and watched Shepherd drive.

"For a greenie, you sure seem to know where you're going," he ventured once.

He saw the sudden stiffening of Shepherd's silhouette against the sky. But Shepherd said nothing.

The second wagon was somewhere behind, wrapped in blackness, Longine suddenly discovered. He strained to watch the wheel-sound, the clanking of bit chains; but heard nothing.

"You've lost the other wagon," he said sharply. "Slow up."

Curley Shepherd obediently reined in. Longine watched him warily, on edge for whatever Shepherd might try. The water barrels shifted. Longine started to turn—saw a dark figure rear up from one of the barrels. He whirled the muzzle of his Sharps. And then Curley Shepherd smashed the back of his neck with the whipstock.

Longine felt his muscles flag and drain. He felt himself wilt over the edge of the wagon. Consciousness remained with him, but the numbing smash against the base of his skull had robbed him of all control of his muscles.

"You beef him, Curley?" a voice said from the darkness.

Curley Shepherd laughed thinly. "We'll do like Mink said—make it look good."

"Where's Tim and that other wagon?"

"Lost. They'll circle around and head back to Jameston's corral. And that's where we'll be soon as we fix this buzzard for good."

Longine felt Shepherd's boot smash into his chest. There was no pain. His body teetered, slid over the side of the wagon. He fell against the wheel and rolled off to hit the sand. The last fall hurt and he felt the slow tingle of returning life seep into his limbs.

Curley Shepherd jumped off the wagon. He located Longine's still-limp body and dragged it back toward the rear of the wagon.

"Where you want him to get it, Pete?" Shepherd jibed. "Wheel across the head, the

belly? Shall we give it to him lengthwise?"

Longine struggled to whip resistance into his limp arms. Shepherd was shoving him against the wide tire of the rear wheel. A word to the horses, a half turn of the huge wheel, and Jed Longine's body would be crushed. He felt Shepherd's weight arranging him; and he managed to wriggle a foot. Shepherd stepped back, chuckling softly.

Longine fought, hurling his every iota of will against the strange inertia of his flesh. He propped an arm under him and tried to lever his body away.

Shepherd's voice came to him as the renegade said, "Drive ahead a few feet, Pete. If that don't do it, we'll back over him again."

A VOICE yelled at the horses; the wagon shifted as the team took up the pull. With a final desperate lunge, Longine threw himself backward just as the heavy wheel turned ponderously. Shepherd called out. The team stopped.

He couldn't run, Longine knew that. He hadn't the strength to stand. At first sight of him, Curley Shepherd would make sure his second attempt didn't fail. Scrambling desperately between the wheels, Longine reached up and gripped the running-gear of the big wagon. He hooked his legs up, bracing them against the wagon's axle.

Shepherd was swearing. Longine drew himself up, biting his lip while sweat popped out across his face. A tiny flame showed where Shepherd struck light.

"Now where in blazes did that jasper get to?" Shepherd growled.

The light came again as Shepherd studied the wheel for blood marks. Then Shepherd was looking at the imprints in the sand.

"Don't flash a light, Curley," the teamster said nervously. "Any Comanche prowlin' along here would have a picnic with you lightin' up things thataway."

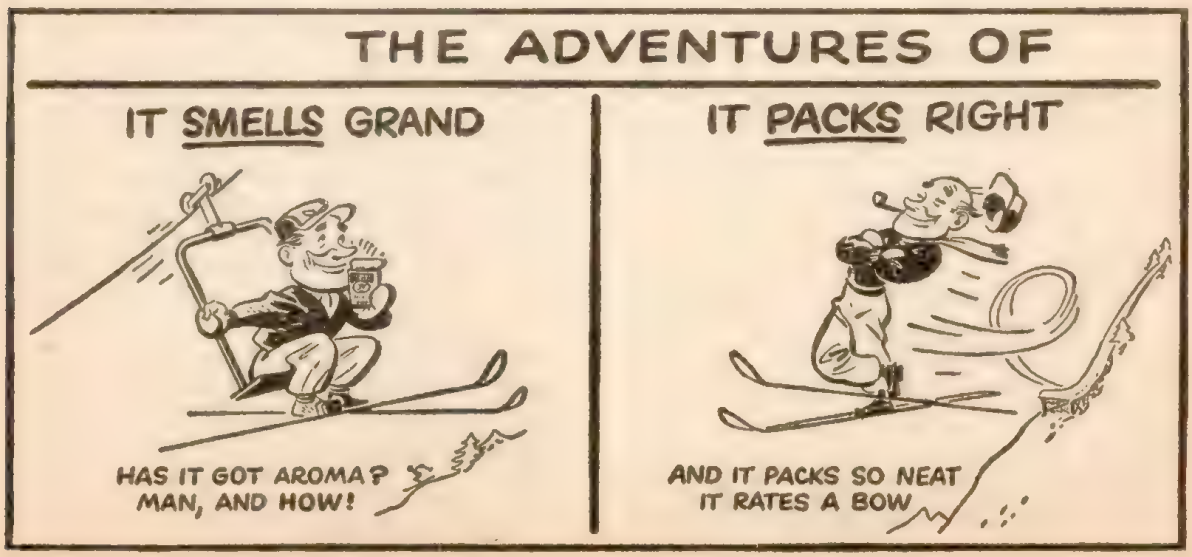
Shepherd's anger grew. He stamped about the wagon, kicking at grass clumps, stopping to listen for some sound of his victim fleeing into the night.

"Let's get back, Curley," the teamster suggested. "I don't like bein' out here alone thisaway. If you smashed Longine's head, he ain't goin' to get far. We can find him in the morning and make sure he's dead."

"Guess you're right," Shepherd conceded grudgingly. "But I'd like to stomp my heels in that buzzard's face a few times."

The wagon shifted and creaked as Curley Shepherd climbed up and began turning the team around. Longine clung to the heavy ash running-gear. His arms seemed about to pull from their sockets. With every jolt, his body sagged and his strength lessened.

He could drop free, he knew, and the wagon would roll on without him. But he would never get back to the corral. Mink's crew would be watching for just that. A quick rifle shot could always be explained by claiming that a prowling Comanche was the target. Longine bit his lip until blood was warm



on his tongue and the pain was a sharp goading torment that keened his strength.

They jolted and rolled, and Longine felt a hazy numbness settle through his arms. But he clung tight. The sound of the team's plodding hoofs, the slow turning of the huge wheels, beat its monotony into his brain and dulled it until he no longer was aware of time's passing.

The wagon had stopped. People's voices were sounting in his ears, when he became aware of the semi-light of a large fire.

" . . . lost," he heard Curley Shepherd's bland explanation. "Longine made us wait while he went to look for the other wagon. He never came back. We figured we heard some Comanches ridin' over west of us, so we sneaked back here."

Parson Crow's voice was ragged with disbelief. "You killed him out there, you mean, you bleedin' scoundrel!"

There was more talk, a slow muttering from many throats.

"We'll make a thorough search in the morning," Herschel Mink's voice spoke out. "We'll find him if we have to stay here for the next three weeks. What say, Mr. Jamestón? Isn't that the way you feel about it?"

Longine slowly, painfully, uncurled his arms, unhooked his legs from the ash-beams of the running-gear. He dropped to the sand and lay there for a long moment.

"We— we've got to find him," he heard Lucia Jameston cry out. "We've got to."

"That's what I say," Herschel Mink agreed. "I'm ashamed of you, Curley. You shouldn't have left him out there alone."

LONGINE rolled into the shadows on the far side of the wagon and pulled himself to his feet. Half the wagon train—those able to be on their feet—were grouped around the fire and around Curley Shepherd. Longine took a step or two, keeping himself hidden. Blood tingled down into his boots. He felt life coming in a strong tide through his chest muscles. He fumbled for the pistol and found it had jolted from his belt. But the butcher knife was there at his left side and he pulled it free.

"I'm new to this country," Curley Shepherd was saying. "I didn't know which way to—" Shepherd broke off with a startled squawk.

Jed Longine grinned flatly. The taste of his own blood was in his mouth. He stepped around the wagon and approached the fire, tense nerved, watching Shepherd and Herschel Mink.

"Maybe you'd like to tell it again," Longine whispered.

Curly Shepherd grabbed for the pistol in his belt. Longine flipped the knife, throwing with all the strength of his long arm.

Curley Shepherd staggered. He dropped the pistol and clutched aimlessly at the knife haft that jutted from his throat.

Herschel Mink had stepped behind Lucia Jameston. And now he came into Longine's

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

IT'S THE PIPE-BLEND CHAMP YOU MUST ALLOW

IT CAN'T BITE!

A BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS, EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. SIR WALTER RALEIGH STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF — NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL.

It costs no more to get the Best!

sight, a gun held low against his thigh. Lucia Jameston saw the gun and tried to knock it aside. Herschel Mink's free arm grabbed her and dragged her struggling body against his own as a shield. The woman fought so that he couldn't shoot, and he turned the muzzle against her.

"Any man makes a move and I'll kill her!" Mink grated. His handsome, smooth-shaven face was white and twisted with emotion. "Pete get that wagon turned outside the corral. The rest of you men get ready. We're leaving this bunch. But put a torch to every Billings-Jameston wagon before we go. That'll take care of that Army equipment. And the talk I'll have with the Military at Santa Fe will take care of Billings-Jameston's trade concessions there." Mink laughed mockingly. "When I explain how I stopped this Army shipment, I'll be the fair-haired boy, and any Yankee trading will be done through me. The Billings-Jameston outfit will seem like peanuts in comparison to Herschel Mink's new business."

Longin stood flat-footed, helpless. Mink had played it clever and Mink had won. He would be feted in Santa Fe, lionized; and his position of favor would put him over all future Santa Fe trade. Billings-Jameston were smashed; the Army battalion doomed to a harried, bitter extinction at the hands of better equipped Mexican soldiery. Well might Herschel Mink gloat.

At this moment Longine saw Parson Crow. The old scout had lifted his Hawken. A Mink steamster started to cry out. Longine sprang at him, smashing the man down with bare fists. Herschel Mink twisted the gun away from the woman's body, leveling it at Jed Longine.

Parson Crow fired!

The heavy lead slug smashed Mink's hand, battered the pistol to wreckage, and the shock spun Mink half around. Longine had been ready, and now he leaped in, slamming into Mink's body with his shoulder and sending him sprawling. Parson Crow's butcher knife winked in the fire-light as he laid the keen edge against Mink's windpipe.

"Just set calm," Parson Crow whispered. "Ain't no Mink skunk goin' no place. Tell 'em to stand quiet, mister! Tell 'em, or I'll slice your gullet so's you could swallow a wagon wheel!"

The knife edge brought a hairline of blood and then Herschel Mink was babbling, begging and cursing his crew in the same breath.

LUCIA JAMESTON swayed. Longine gathered her against his chest, and only then discovered that she was far from fainting. Her eyes crinkled up at him.

"An inch either way and that Galena lead would have smashed into your back," Longine husked shakily. "An inch— Glory, what a shot that was." He started to shove the woman away. "Your Dad'll want to know—"

"That can wait," she said softly. "He's asleep now." The blue eyes flashed. "I just like my men to wake up one at a time." And she snuggled against him.

Nor was Jed Longine long in catching her meaning. He grinned, arms tightening about her.

"Roust out!" he yelled—the train captain giving orders again. "It may take all night, but we're harnessing up and taking this train to the Arkansas." He laughed aloud, shaking the woman in his arms.

Mink and his men could be fettered, kept hidden, taken back to Independence. There the law would hang some of them for the murder of Wiley Bush and Hank Withers. So thinking, Jed Longine watched old Parson Crow goad Herschel Mink to his feet.

"Roll on," Longine whooped happily. "Roll on to Santa Fe."

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by
ART KERCHEVAL

"You're still drunk," Cantrell said

CAPTAIN FUGITIVE

BLACK MOUNTAIN turned out en masse, all three hundred and forty-two of its hoarsely cheering citizens, to watch the Black Mountain nine swamp the Terrible Cannibals from Cedar City. The timberline sun beat down on the pine-bordered clearing, there at the edge of town, as the eager local urchins scrambled up for the last half of the ninth. To these same citizens, the saddle-lean and six-foot stranger, Cap Cantrell, sitting up there on the stake-and-rider fence and observing his Black Mountain boys in action, was the essence, and the substance, of a gent to tie to.

All of which showed Black Mountain was a trusting town, too trusting. But how could it know that the suddenly eminent Cap Cantrell was really one "Lefty" Roderick, escap-

He was the idol of the town, but the Sheriff knew that he had feet of clay

ing the consequences of his old exploits and planning new ones?

Sheriff Phil Lancaster climbed up to the top rail beside him. He was eating peanuts, cracking the shells with his teeth, and he offered some. Cap shook his head, keeping his eye on his boys. He didn't like Lancaster hovering so close, not a little bit.

"Won't last long, will it?" Lancaster said. "Some day, sooner or later, they'll find out, and it will be a bad day for everyone concerned." He inclined his head, to indicate all of Black Mountain's citizens.

Cantrell swung around, eyes roused to a new interest in this mild-mannered little lawman who, up till now, had led a seemingly quiet existence raising radishes and turnips in his amateur garden behind the jail and reading deep books, instead of pursuing such violent and perhaps more vicious courses as combating lawlessness.

"Just what are you talking about, Lancaster?"

Lancaster spat out a peanut; it must have been a bad one. "Why," he said, "I know who you are, and that's the thing that bothers me. The thing you and I are going to bring out into the open, between the two of us, in order that we'll arrive at some conclusion."

"He-e-ey, Sammy! Slam it over that ridge yonder, Sammy boy! You can do it, you can do it!"

That was Cantrell, half rising and yelling now to his star batter, yelling and forgetting completely for the moment that Sheriff Phil Lancaster was seated next to him, waiting worriedly against the turn of events. Cap Cantrell, throwing his all into this ball game, with a sweeping interest in his boys, instead of remembering why he had come here. In that instant, snub-nosed little Sammy McGraw swung with all his might. He connected—and it had all the proportions of a homer.

WITH a whoop, Cantrell slapped Lancaster across the back, nearly spilling him from his perch. "He did it, Sheriff, he did it! Black Mountain's almost got the game!"

"That's part of the puzzle," Lancaster said mildly, righting himself with effort. "You've got your moments of being Cap Cantrell. But underneath it all, you're still Lefty Roderick."

"What kind of ice does that cut?" Cantrell's eyes were fixed more tightly on the game, in spite of the fact that it had become a suddenly meaningless swirl.

Lancaster rummaged his sack once more, and seemed disappointed to find it empty. "Means," he said carefully, "my duty is plain before me."

Cantrell again looked at him and his voice took on edge. "It'd be a hard nut to crack, and your teeth don't look none too strong."

"Who said," Lancaster crumpled up his sack and threw it away, "I'm going to knuckle to my duty. Maybe I'm satisfied with the way things are. Maybe I'm satisfied with Cap Cantrell." His eyes became glued onto that stubblefield diamond, too, though Cantrell knew he wasn't seeing the game.

"I don't get it," Cantrell said with irritation. "I like a man to talk straight out. Especially I don't like sheriffs who have something up their sleeves."

The game was over. The Black Mountain boys had won. They were swarming all around Cantrell, now, like he was Buffalo Bill or Kit Carson or somebody else Big League. There was little Jimmy Cooley who'd skinned his knee in the fifth and his eyes were big as wagon wheels as Cantrell checked his bandage and told him about the time he was a southpaw hurler back East.

"You see how it is," Lancaster said, later, when they were seated in his office. "I'll be frank with you. I'm not going to arrest you, Cap. As far as I'm concerned, the Texas authorities will have to do without you."

Cantrell accepted the drink offered him. "Why the sudden generosity?" he asked.

"It's not sudden," Lancaster said, sipping his liquor. "It goes back six months, to the day you first rode into Black Mountain. I asked myself, 'Who is this stranger? Cowhand? Saddlebum? Outlaw? Whatever he is, he stacks up all-man—the kind of man I always wanted to be but never could make the grade.' "

Cantrell settled back in his chair with his glass.

"Being this county's only claim to having law enforcement, I kept my eye on you,"

Lancaster went on. "When a gent can afford to put up at a hotel and eat high-priced meals and squander on duds—all that without working—he's pretty much of a moneybags. Where does his money come from?"

Cantrell nodded. "So you figured it out I was on the dodge?"

"Exactly." Lancaster leaned forward. "I leafed through the reward dodgers then and found your picture. Found they wanted you for some rather unforgivable crimes down in Texas. By rights, I should have given you a train ride with a deputy escort."

"You're a queer duck, Lancaster."

"Maybe I am. I admit it, I never should have been sheriff. But I am, and I've got to fumble through it somehow. My heart isn't in it. You understand. Your heart isn't in being a sheepherder."

Cantrell grinned a little at the comparison, setting down his glass and pulling out makings. "Damned if you don't interest me."

"It was all a joke in the first place," Lancaster said. "I'm not very old to the West, and I was a target for many pranks. The prize play of all was when some ruffians put up my name for sheriff. No one would listen to my protests—and who else wanted such a dangerous job for a measly fifty dollars a month?"

"So you found yourself elected." Cantrell licked the paper.

Lancaster looked up. "Unfortunately," he said quickly. "But there is a slightly stubborn streak in me, that crops out at being ridiculed. It was a stubbornness that caused me to buy an old six-shooter and start practising. To be brief, I amazed myself more than anyone else when I shot dead in his tracks one Grat Legrange, the leader of those ruffians."

CANTRELL stared at him now. For some reason, and it wasn't because of his own hide, he liked this man. Black Mountain's sheriff had something in the cast of his finely molded face that lifted him above most men. It was there in the intelligent blue eyes, the carefully trimmed mustache, and the sensitive set of his lips. Phil Lancaster belonged to his garden and his books. He was a putterer, and he had every right to be. He was out of place in any world of law badges and gun-hung arrogance and lives hanging by thin threads.

"But I'm not a natural born welsher, Cap," the sheriff said with a sharpness that matched the slamming down of his glass. "I'm being paid fifty a month to do my job, and it rubs me sore I'm not doing it. There's that much of an honest urge in me. Some day, when I pass my badge on to another man, I'll remember the day I couldn't put Lefty Roderick in jail. The failure will haunt me, no matter how many arguments I can put up. A Lancaster, no matter how uninspiring his life might have been, was never before without honor."

Cantrell took a drag thoughtfully. He watched the lazy course of a smoke ring curling toward lodgepole ceiling beams. "In other words," he asked, with tight wonder, "I go on being Cap Cantrell in your little town?"

"That's the size of it," Lancaster said—and there was a definite trace of hero worship in his expression. "I won't have you rotting behind the bars of a Texas prison, when you can keep on doing worlds of good. If ever the West has a Hall of Fame all its own, it won't be men like Phil Lancaster who will be included in it. It will be men of the stature of Cap Cantrell."

Cantrell got up, twisted the cigarette stub between his fingers, and paced.

"Cap, I'm not saying why you're doing it, I'm saying you're doing it." The little sheriff rose and went to the door and looked out upon the sunset hues of the town he was expected to control. "You've made yourself a champion of the kids. They call you their captain. You've organized their baseball team. That's sort of a new idea out in this country—and it's much needed. You've planned picnics for them, and exploring trips—"

Cantrell stopped and was thoughtful, hands rammed in cartridge belt. "You place your bets careful," he said to himself.

Lancaster turned. "Don't you see, Cap, you've showed them things that maybe their own folks haven't got time to show them? Little things, that are big things, like learning to swim, making a rawhide quirt, teach-

ing a pony tricks, or learning to defend themselves. Whether you know it or not, you enjoy it. And in six months in this town, you're looked up to."

Cantrell said then, with a humorless little shrug, "Seems all the plays went my way."

Lancaster stepped eagerly forward. "That's why, you see," he said, "I'm making one rather shameful wrong move of mine pave the way for a lot of right moves on the part of Cap Cantrell. As long, of course, as you keep on forgetting you're Lefty Roderick in my bailiwick. . . ."

Quick timberline night spread its great black bedding over the town as Cantrell walked out upon the main street, Lancaster's words eating into him. A man could ride a million miles, he thought, and never run into another Phil Lancaster. Once having met him, you could never shake him out of your memory. Cantrell felt, more than ever, an admiration for the little badge-toter. At the same time, he felt nettling uncertainties about himself.

He stood, grave eyes studying this town. Black Mountain was snugged down low amidst a rolling pattern of pine-blanketed hills. The yellow stars of dozens of coal-oil lamps shone in the framework of as many friendly windows. Here on the darkened street was the absence of violence that had probably marked the town's beginnings. Gone was the flashing aliveness of its doubtless gold-fever birth and grown into its vitals was a soberness and steadiness that only the works and dreams of the families that followed the boom years can give it.

He lighted a cigarette, walking downstreet toward his hotel. He walked with a slowness, allowing without resistance the feel of this town to get into him. He wondered if a man's wild days would ever reach out to him here. Phil Lancaster knew, of course, but Lancaster wouldn't talk. Cap Cantrell had a sudden, unaccountable longing to remain, to work out his years in this community, longing without a search for motives. But he shook his head.

TEXAS. They wanted him down there. There was the matter of several stagecoaches subjected to the humiliation of his demanding gun. When the trail had become a little overwarm, he had pointed his blaze-face sorrel northward, knocking over a few Concords along the way to relieve the monotony. Coming into the Colorado Rockies, he'd sized up Black Mountain as a holing-up place and a later prospect for a getaway haul. The tension flowed out of him when he discovered the peace that was here. But strangers are regarded with suspicion, and Lefty Roderick, alias Cantrell, had decided to stop being a stranger.

He smiled. Play up to people's kids, and get yourself set in solid, every time. Organize a baseball team for 'em, show 'em how to shoot a .22, or anything. Tell 'em how you used to be a great southpaw in the Eastern cities. That was a real laugh, of course, when the only southpawing worth mentioning you'd ever done was with a Colt .45, left-handed. But the kids swallowed it whole—and so did the parents, which was what counted. In a few days, you were no longer a stranger in Black Mountain, and no suspicious eye was directed your way, except Lancaster's. The only hitch was that you had begun to like the kids. . . .

Cantrell slept that night, secure in the belief that Phil Lancaster would not betray his self-appointed trust.

In the days that followed, Cantrell pursued routine, getting up late and shaving leisurely, having himself hearty breakfasts of ham and eggs. Laziness wasn't part of his ordinary procedure. Texas had made him hard and lean in the saddle. But as long as the loot lasted, he saw no need to be overly ambitious. Most of his day he spent with the summer-vacationing youngsters, getting them in shape to trim that hard-boiled team down in Lazoo Tanks next Saturday. His Black Mountain bunch would soon be the champions of the country.

There was a day, now and then, when he managed to shuck his team long enough to go on a fishing jaunt with Sheriff Lancaster. They were days when Texas or stagecoaches or law badges were never mentioned. Lancaster talked about his books and Cantrell liked that. He'd never heard of a galoot named Shakespeare, but he promised to try him for size. Cantrell felt uplifted on these

trips and his awe and respect for Lancaster grew.

But a man can't hide everything, even if he is as earnest to do so as Lancaster. He can talk a blue streak about his books, but he can't hide the trouble shadows in his eyes. They remained in the strange sheriff's and they deepened a little with the passing days. It was as if there was a time of cataclysmic inevitabilities coming soon and Lancaster had a fearsome insight into them—Lancaster, who lived in unease and dishonor.

Saturday. Black Mountain defeated Lazoo Tanks. It was the day disaster also struck. Cantrell knew it somehow, even as that homing baseball audience knew it, without a word being passed. A town has a way of telling it to you through its silence. Every hushed log house speaks of it and sends you half running, half stumbling over wagon ruts to have the human verification.

Phil Lancaster was watering his lettuce when Cantrell came in. He set down his improvised sprinkler and looked up at the sky with a philosophic wisdom in his placid eyes and nodded with a moroseness. "It had to come, as I have feared for weeks," he said tremulously. "Doubtless, Cap, you haven't taken the time to consider the implications."

"Lower your sights," Cantrell told him.

Lancaster looked at him. "Of course," he said, "you wouldn't have heard yet. The way things stand, and to use a crude epithet, there's hell to pay. It looks as if you will be the new mayor of Black Mountain."

Cantrell stared at him, the tobacco and paper he was about to join together tumbling from his fingers. He took a backward step, unable to understand this.

"Mayor—me? Say, what kind of shenanigans—"

"It's true, Cap." Lancaster stood erect but trembling. "I've known it for a long time—that it would come. Now and then they've talked about it, that if anything happened to Jonas Hartsell you would be the most likely prospect. Well, the news has come too soon for them to take action on it, but these people will want you."

Cantrell wanted to laugh, but not because this was funny.

LANCASTER came toward him. "It boils down to this: Mayor Hartsell had his third stroke this afternoon. He may live to tell about it, but he'll not be in shape to take up his official duties. There'll be this overwhelming demand for you to fill the vacancy."

"They can take their mayor's chair and—" Cantrell began.

"I understand your feelings in the matter," Lancaster said with a long sigh. "The turn of events is not good. Not good at all, Cap, because it indeed forces me to hand myself a quick ultimatum."

"Go on." Cantrell was steady, too steady.

"Forces me, indeed, to make an immediate choice between a man named Cantrell and something of a rat's cousin named Roderick."

Cantrell saw it then, saw that he would have to leave. Freedom, like the greased pig, was slipping away, slipping away. He'd thought he'd had it here, but it was already out of his reach. He walked out of the little garden and his thoughts walked with him, like the taunting soft-stalkers of doom. It was a slow walk, timed with his reluctance to pull up his shallowly planted roots—Black Mountain was so imbedded in his blood and in his bones.

He could not be mayor of this town; that was definite. Lancaster, who was already betraying the people's confidence, could not go so far as to give his assent to the nomination of an outlaw. There was no guarantee that Lefty Roderick would not crop out again. Looking upon himself with all honesty, Cantrell decided he could make no such guarantees even to himself!

He went to his hotel room and he packed his saddle-bags. In the morning, his sorrel would take him northward. Maybe, somewhere, he'd start the pattern all over again. He fashioned a cigarette and, fully dressed, lay down on the bed, black oaths roiling inside him for a baker's dozen strongboxes rifled along the Texas trails. The cigarette went out. The hours went on. The thoughts went on.

Outside, he could hear town noises. Not the ordinary noises, but sounds of obvious concern. Cantrell didn't look, but he knew

men were bunched here and there discussing him, mentally shaping him into a chair-warming politician. It wasn't good at all. After a time the noises quit, but another day would bring them out stronger than ever.

It must have been late, when the rap sounded on the door. Still dressed, Cantrell sprang up, his gun ready as he took a couple of steps forward and halted.

"Who's there?" he asked with a roughness.

"Me. Phil Lancaster."

Cantrell jerked open the door. He stared at a startlingly different man than the one who had so recently and with such soulful application encouraged his vegetables and dissected his Shakespeare. Phil Lancaster had all the appearances of a man suffering the aftermath of strong and fiery liquids. His eyes were as big and sad and homely as a bull elk's. No dignity prevailed at all in his hair, which stuck out like an uncurried hybrid's. He was weaving a little, bracing himself against the doorjamb in a try for equilibrium.

"You've guessed it," Lancaster nodded, hiccoughing. "I'm drunk."

Cantrell could only stare.

"At least I *was* drunk," Lancaster said. "In shameful cahoots with Demon Rum! You see before you, Cap, one who has suffered much from indecision."

Cantrell, of a sudden, remembered he still held his gun, and put it up. "I don't get you," he said.

Lancaster looked at him. It was a soberer look. "I couldn't make up my mind," he said, as if to himself. "I was foolish, I guess, to think the bottle would help." He shook his head to clear away the mental cobwebs. "Managed to get up here, finally, after I made sure the hotel clerk was asleep. You're my friend, Cap, my very special friend. Hard to go against one's friend. But—but my head is clearing now and I know what I must do."

"You're still drunk," Cantrell said.

SLOWLY Lancaster shook his head, this time with firmness. "No, I am perfectly aware what I am about." He straightened then and Cantrell sensed a vast purpose in this little man. Swept away were the last vestiges of his world-sized hangover and he was suddenly ripping his badge from his shirt.

"Don't you see?" Lancaster said, star now lying face-up in his palm. "I have failed my office completely, because I won't make one move to stop the forces that would make you mayor. I can't go on straddling both sides. I refuse to remain sheriff, if I can't fulfill the requirements impartially. I wasn't cut out for this sort of business, anyway, and I'm going to devote my full energies from now on to my rutabagas and the belles-lettres of the masters."

"Lancaster, you're crazy—"

"I have destroyed that old dodger," the former sheriff said, unperturbed. "No one shall ever know. In time, the trails after Lefty Roderick will no longer be hot. We can only hope you will be able to stamp out Roderick inside of you. Perhaps your new, wonderful life in Black Mountain will help you do that. Here you are champion. Captain. Yes, let it be thus as long as there's a pine board standing in this little hamlet!"

"Lancaster, you can't do it," Cantrell said. "Supposing I just ride out of here? Supposing I'm never seen again?"

"It isn't as easy as all that," Lancaster told him with gloomy shakes of his head. "You belong here. You've sunk some roots."

Cantrell nodded as self-blame hit him in that moment and desire rode him with dark demand to help this friendly little man. For all this was immensely irregular to Phil Lancaster. Phil Lancaster, who feared being sheriff, but feared more being a failure. Cantrell came toward him, and a sudden idea struck him, how maybe to disillusion Lancaster!

"Listen, Lancaster, and get it! I'm Lefty Roderick and I'm bull tough, understand? Me, I think the folks around here, including you, are too stupid to put their boots on. And furthermore, I've never been no real kid-lover—"

"Thanks." Lancaster shook his head again, smiling. "Thanks for trying, anyway. But not you, nor anyone else, can prevail upon me to wear this badge again. I'm turning it over to the county commissioners in the morning. That will make it official."

He turned and walked out. Cantrell stood there a long time staring at the closed door. The little room was silent, the town was silent, as if their invisible ears were strained to catch his whispering thoughts. A course of action must open for him to help a friend, he knew. And Lancaster had set a time limit.

It was not yet daylight when he finally evolved the desperate plan. . . .

Feeble glimmer of false dawn was upon Black Mountain as he turned his talents toward an all-too-familiar pursuit, thinking, however, that this might be somewhat different from stagecoaches. Once before, he recalled, he'd had an idea something like this, when a more selfish aim of acquiring a future getaway stake was pitchforking him in the rear, an idea which, in the interim, had grown dull.

The immediate scheme involved dynamite, which he'd just filched from a powder magazine, and which now tore the little safe wide open. He stooped and scooped its contents into saddle-bags. He could hear the shouts of townspeople as he dashed out of the place. Leaping upon his waiting horse, he thundered away from town. He rode into the black inviting fastnesses of the surrounding Rockies. Not long after, horsemen were hard on his heels.

It was tight going. Shots hummed close. Some of those riders were edging nearer. Cantrell was beginning to think he'd met his Rocky Mountain Waterloo.

HE ROUNDED a bend and momentarily he was out of their sight. He worked the old routine then, giving them the slip. The possemen kept to the trail over the hills, while he threaded deep and fast into a buckbrush tangle, and waited. He kicked in spurs, presently, and followed them at cautious distance. Dawn spread and day came in full flower. Mid-morning laid hold when he had sufficient knowledge of their haphazard strategy. They had split into twos and threes at a place called the Forks. From a vantage point Cantrell watched their weavings among the lodgepoles and quaking aspens.

He felt reasonably safe for a time; safe because he could anticipate their moves. To him it was a waiting game, a time for a breather. Toward the middle of the afternoon the men grouped again, back at the Forks. From his rock shelter, not twenty yards distant, Cantrell could hear sounds of argument. And then he saw, as he had hoped he would, that the posse was giving up and going home, at least until another day. All of them, that is, except Lancaster.

Cantrell had had a hunch that Lancaster would remain. The little sheriff, of all those men, would have gathered something of the inner workings of Cantrell's mind. When the woods were clear of scalp-hunters, Cantrell rode out into the open.

The smile was formed because Sheriff Phil Lancaster seemingly wasn't too earnestly in the pursuit of his duties at the moment. He had dismounted and was seated propped with some dignity against a tree, using what remained of daylight to leaf through a favorite book, which Cantrell had seen him pull from a saddle-bag.

"Shakespeare again," Cantrell said, pulling in.

Lancaster looked up at him, and reluctantly closed the book. "Knew you'd come," he said. "And a man must fill all his moments."

"You're smart, Lancaster."

The little man came to his feet. There was a stiffness in him from too much riding. Cantrell saw that he again wore the badge.

"You aren't too difficult to decipher," Lancaster said. "You did this thing to force my hand, Cap, as the West puts it."

Cantrell grinned flatly. He tugged out the makings. "Seems," he said, "I've succeeded."

"You are a devil," Lancaster said. "But a most unselfish one. You rightly figured there was a limit to what I would stand—especially if you committed robbery in my bailiwick—and deliberately placed yourself at my mercy." He sighed. "For which unselfish act, Cap, I am grateful. You may consider yourself—though without the unsightly trimmings—under arrest."

Shades of Lancaster's shooting of Grat Legrange! Cantrell's smoke, and his triumph, were going through him.

"Wait," Lancaster said, "I am not through. We have another overwhelming obligation."

"Shoot," Cantrell said, disturbed.

"You are a hero down there, to people that need a hero, Cap. We can't let those kids, or their folks, down. So I've decided they can never know about Lefty Roderick."

"How—" Cantrell began.

"Simple," Lancaster said. "No one had a glimpse of your face, while you were in the process of unlawfully possessing bank capital. I will return to Black Mountain with the loot, which I will say was discarded for some unknown reason by the unidentified and still missing holdup." His eyes narrowed. "You, however, will not go unpunished. Texas is wailing and gnashing her teeth and I shall promptly dump you into the lap of the old amazon."

"Sounds interesting," Cantrell said.

"Oh, I shall have to employ a tactful tongue," Lancaster said musingly. "Folks will wonder about the lack of your presence. I shall steer them from their slightest suspicions. I'll simply tell them you've decided to take a long trip, and you may or may not be back." He stretched himself. "That will cause disappointment among many, of course, but not the shock of having been betrayed by a cow-country Judas."

"Might work," Cantrell nodded, frowning.

"It *has* to work." Lancaster seemed taller. "Why, it makes me feel like a new man—no duties unfulfilled. Someday, of course, I won't have to be sheriff. And someday, maybe, you'll be free. To come back to Black Mountain."

CANTRELL shook his head. "Dunno. The things I did was pretty awful."

Not seeming to hear, Lancaster said, "Superfluous for me to mention it, I suppose, but I'd prefer giving you godspeed without a deputy escort. A man of your caliber should be allowed the dignity of some honor and trust."

"Could be," Cantrell said, looking very thoughtful.

"By putting our heads together," Lancaster concluded, "we have emerged, somehow, from a most embarrassing dilemma. You wouldn't throw rocks into a smoothly operating machine by seeking again the haunts and ways of Lefty Roderick. Good luck, Cap, and take this with you. It will while away many unhappy hours."

Cantrell accepted the gift—a book called *As You Like It.* He gulped.

"So long," he said huskily from his saddle, a few minutes later. "It was time I came clean."

Lancaster, he saw, was waving at him, a little thin-mustached man he would never forget. He turned away, riding, his mind jammed with Black Mountain memories. One thing was certain, he vowed as he thoughtfully put miles behind him. There'd be no more southpawing on the wrong side of the fence.

Swing wide those prison gates, Texas, for one of your scarlet sons is coming. With some balking at the bit, of course. He'd rather stay in these hills and lose himself in the whoop and holler of tough, mountain baseball and the problems of a bunch of wild-haired kids and sometimes go fishing with a peculiar and mighty peaceful gent, but things just aren't ticketed that way. Not unless you're uncommon forgiving, Texas, after you're rough for a while.

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THE BIG ONE

By C. V. TENCH

"If you shoot him, you first shoot me!"

IN SEPTEMBER Joe McDougal came to the Vawn Trading Post. Of medium build, wiry, swarthy, around forty, he had—perhaps acquired from the Scot factor who had been his father, certainly not from the comely Cree maiden who had been his mother—that rare thing for a man of his mixed breed, ambition. He explained to grizzled old John Vawn, and his grown son, Jim, who bred sled dogs as a sideline to their trading, that his ambition was presently to have a trading post of his own. In the meantime, he worked for others, saving every penny he could. Born and reared in Canada's Northland he knew many Indian dialects, he assured John Vawn.

Nodding quietly, exchanging a glance with his son, John Vawn considered all this. Joe McDougal had that air of solid purpose about him that he liked in a man, although

Swift and Sure Is the Vengeance of the Wild Forest!

he could see that that determination was amply mixed with ruthlessness. Joe McDougal also had his squaw, Meeswah, with him, and his fourteen-year-old son. The boy was absorbed in fondling a half-grown dog that had aproached. Glancing at him, John Vawn then noticed with something of a shock that not only was the boy undersized and thin for his age, but that his left forearm and hand were crippled and useless.

"Him!" Joe McDougal said contemptuously, noticing John Vawn's slight start. "*Sacre Dieu!* What happen we do not know, but here in a country where a man needs a strong body I am given such a son. He is no good yet I must keep him. And my squaw can now have no more. "

"His name?" John Vawn asked, acutely aware of a pair of great dark eyes now looking up at him, starkly revealing the soul of a lone, unloved boy; a lonely child's heart aching for a touch of human kindness. That look caused John Vawn to clear his throat noisily.

"His name?" Joe's eyes gleamed coldly. "We call him Taatuk, the useless one. All he does is talk to dogs and the wild things and make friends with them. He is good for nothing."

JOE spat out the name like an epithet and Taatuk shrank back, hurt and dread showing in his eyes, and in that moment John Vawn saw whippings, revilings, clothes and food begrudged. Saw that Joe McDougal bore no love for his son.

"And the youngster's sensitive," John Vawn told himself. "That's unusual in natives."

"I think I can use you, Joe," he said aloud. "Been looking for a likely man. We've built a branch post at Dismal Lake, around sixty miles from here. Virgin trapping country. Natives there are Dogribs; good fur-getters. Jim'll go with you with two power-scow loads of goods; can just about make it before freeze-up. Jim'll stay there till you're set, then come back."

"Oh, *merci, merci, m'sieu!*" Joe beamed.

"Speak French, too, eh?" John Vawn asked. "That's also handy up here. Well, you'll get a good wage, everything found, and a percentage of the season's profits. But not even any wage if the profits don't warrant it. It'll be up to you."

"There'll be good profits, Mr. Vawn," Joe McDougal promised eagerly. "In new country I cannot fail."

"But you can," John Vawn contradicted. "That country's thick with game; elk, moose, caribou. And that means wolves. They're bad out there. One pack, led by a big black brute, is especially destructive. Last winter they raised hell with traplines, eating trapped fur-bearers. The Dogribs finally pulled up their traps. They haven't a half-dozen rifles among them and the ones who have can't hit anything, and I won't stand for the use of poison bait in my territory. It'll bt up to you to cut down on the wolves."

"I can do it," Joe promised. "I can shoot and will now have all the ammunition I want."

"Yes," John Vawn nodded. "Furthermore, like I told the Dogribs, I'll pay twenty-five dollars above market price for wolf pelts."

"Then I shall have a good job and also make side money," Joe grinned.

"But just one more thing," John Vawn added. "You've got to be good to Taatuk. You'll have ample groceries and meat's right outside your door. See that the boy gets all he wants. And no more whippings."

"But he not worth his grub," Joe protested. "He do only squaw work."

"And is that his fault?" John Vawn asked sharply. "It'll be my grub and the boy's to have all he wants. Savvy?"

"I savvy," Joe answered reluctantly, but there was an ugly glint in his black eyes as he glanced sideways at Taatuk. They were as baleful as the eyes of a wolf.

By the end of November Joe McDougal was well established at the Dismal Lake post. Many Dogribs had already called and received their credit of a winter's supply of necessities on the usual condition that they would trade the pelts they caught at no other post.

But John Vawn had not exaggerated the wolf menace. So far the snowfall had been

unseasonably light and that made for hunger amongst the black and gray marauders, for when the snow is deep wolves can easily overtake the heavier deer that break through the snow crust and flounder helplessly when they try to run. Thus when the snow is deep, the wolves fare well, but when the snowfall is light, the deer can outpace their enemies. In consequence, the wolves become ravenous and dangerous.

With the snowfall light Joe feared that the shaggy killers might turn to trailing his native trappers, and eat the smaller trapped fur-bearers. If so, in disgust the Dogribs might abandon trapping for another season. So Joe's nightly prayer was for snow.

Came the night when his plea to his patron saints was answered. Snow, many feet of it, fell.

BUT Taatuk was more content than ever before in his short life. His father was shrewd enough to know on which side his bread was buttered and Taatuk now had ample food. Already his small frame was filling out, and although there had been many revilings, there had been no more whippings.

To the lone, unloved boy Dismal Lake with its evergreen-clad shore was not a bleak and desolate spot but beautiful beyond words, for he dreamed that out of that brooding wilderness might some day come something to love and to be loved in return to fill his empty life. Something within his sensitive being had always responded passionately to the wild things.

The booming notes of the white horned owls, the shrill yapping of foxes, even the mournful dirge of the wolves filled him with a glowing ecstasy he could not explain. Uncomplainingly he performed the numerous small tasks assigned to him, but he spent many hours snow-shoeing through the timber or on the frozen surface of the lake, thrilling even to just studying the tracks of the wild things. When he returned from such expeditions his eyes would be filled with a warm glow neither his mother nor father could understand. They would look at him puzzledly, glance at one another and shrug.

Hugging his dreams to himself, Taatuk did not notice their glances.

It was on one of these expeditions that Taatuk abruptly came upon the wolf pack led by the big black animal. Trained from babyhood to move through the woods without sound he surprised the pack feeding on a moose. As he showed the wolves became rigid. Huge, shaggy-coated brutes they just stood glaring. But, satiated, they made no attempt to attack. Nor did they offer to retreat. As was their nature they would gorge, sleep nearby, and gorge again until they had eaten the best parts of the carcass.

Ecstasy shook Taatuk but no fear. Never before had he been so close to any of the killer-kings of the Northland. To him sled dogs and the wild things had always meant more than his own kind. He caught his breath sharply as the leader took one short step towards him, for never before had Taatuk seen such a magnificent animal. Then he saw that which held him breathless.

The black was a dog! The wolves were lean, rangy, with long pointed snouts. The black's head was wider, nose shorter and blunter. His neck was so thick it almost seemed part of his broad chest, a chest that sloped gracefully to powerful hindquarters. And he did not glare with the baleful, unwinking, impersonal stare of the others. His brown eyes reflected traits not found in wolves; intelligence and curiosity.

Yet Taatuk was not altogether surprised. It had happened before and would happen again that ocasionally sled dogs, the wild strain dominating the domestic strain, would join their kin, the wolves.

Staring fascinatedly, Taatuk searched his mind for an appropriate name for the black, and there came to him the Chipewyah word, Mosqui, the big one. He whispered the name and the dog immediately cocked inquisitive ears, proof that he had heard human tongue before.

"Oh, Mosqui, but you are beautiful," Taatuk whispered. "I would like you for my own."

Thus engrossed, Taatuk had momentarily forgotten the other animals and the behavior of wolves is as unpredictable as in all wild animals. Now came threatening

snarls. Lips were drawn back from gleaming fangs. Hackles rose. For a moment, then, Taatuk knew fear. One small boy, weighing barely one hundred pounds, and each of the killers would have weighed half that again, and Mosqui even more.

"But I shall come again, Mosqui," Taatuk whispered in awe as he began to inch away.

The other wolves then returned to their feeding, but Mosqui stood like a statue watching until Taatuk had disappeared amongst the trees.

At suppertime Taatuk was still so thrilled with the thought of having something to love, and of being loved in return, he could not prevent his eyes from revealing his inward glow.

Noting that expression his father asked sneeringly: "You've been speaking to the squirrels again?"

"No, father."

"Then what?"

That inner streak of fine idealism would not permit Taatuk to lie, and he answered reluctantly: "Wolves, at their kill."

"Wolves!" Joe leaped to his feet eagerly. "And at a fresh kill? Then they will still be there. Quick! You carry the big electric lantern and I'll take my rifle. We will surprise them."

"But—" Stark anguish filled Taatuk at thought of Mosqui falling to a bullet.

"Quick, I said!" Joe snarled, grasping him by one shoulder. "Sissy that you are, you never kill anything, but I promised Mr. Vawn to shoot many wolves. Hurry!"

IT WAS not far and they covered the distance quickly yet as silently as wraiths. When they caught the heavy scent of fresh blood and flesh, Joe tapped Taatuk on the shoulder. It was the agreed upon signal.

His whole heart pleading with the saints to spare Mosqui, Taatuk switched on the light, swinging the powerful beam all about the moose carcass. It caught green eyes, luminous in the glow, and the wolves were so surprised and gorged they were sluggish in uncurling from their snow nests. Joe was an expert shot and his rifle twice snapped viciously. Two wolves fell twisting to the snow. And then the rest were gone.

Taatuk was shaking as he and his father hurried towards the slain animals. Would one of them be Mosqui? His heart sang a paean of thanks when he saw Mosqui was not among them. And now he had to hold the lantern while his delighted father quickly and skillfully stripped the pelts from the victims. Made jovial by his initial success, even though burdened by the heavy green hides, Joe chatted excitedly all the way back to the post.

But Taatuk remained silent. Already two of Mosqui's pack and now, knowing they were in the vicinity, his father would no doubt concentrate upon exterminating them all.

This dread was intensified when long before daybreak he heard his father moving around and the opening and shutting of the back door. He would be returning to the moose carcass. Presently he heard the faraway crack of his father's rifle and at breakfast his father was all gloating greed. He had got one more wolf.

"The hide's not worth only four-five dollars apiece," Joe grinned, "that why no one much bothers to get wolves, but Mr. Vawn pay extra twenty-five dollars each so already I make extra eighty-ninety dollars. Good pay for little work."

Taatuk remained silent and later had to force himself to steal out to the pelt shed to look at the third hide.

It was gray!

Towards evening Taatuk went again to the moose carcass. Light snow had been falling all day and there were no fresh tracks near the meat. Three of their number shot on the spot, the pack would not return. But, ever hungry, they would kill again and the next day he would hunt for their most recent kill.

By hurrying through his chores the next day Taatuk was able to set out right after the noon meal. The lightly-falling snow soon cloaked him and presently he was as a white ghost slipping through the trees. Later, he heard the sound which is so awesome; the deep tonguing wolves give when about to bring down their quarry. Presently Taatuk came to a deep furrow in the snow where a fear-crazed caribou had thrust itself along

almost belly deep. On either side were the tracks of wolves, closing in in great bounds. Next there came to Taatuk's ears an even worse sound, like nothing else on earth; the sound of wolves feeding. Powerful jaws gnashing bones, ravenous throats gurgling blood and gulping hunks of raw flesh. For a moment he wavered, dread chilling him, then urge to again see Mosqui sent him slowly and warily forward.

When he at last came upon the pack feeding for long moments, sheltered by a tree, he watched with fascination. The wolves fed fast. One by one they presently sat back on their haunches, licking at blood-reddened muzzles, then moving away began to prepare their snow nests.

Taatuk counted six, including Mosqui. But although Mosqui was adjudged the leader of the pack, he would not be the killer, Taatuk's wild lore told him. In every pack, there is usually but one killer, the others acting as trailers and worriers. Staring, Taatuk decided that a large and rangy young female was the killer, for the shaggy hide of her body was drenched where blood had gushed when she had leaped at the caribou, sinking her teeth into the flank.

NOW that the wolves were satiated Taatuk dared show himself, slowly easing out from his shelter. As before the wolves at once became statues, eyes glaring balefully. But, it seemed to Taatuk, Mosqui's eyes showed friendliness as well as wariness.

"Mosqui!" Taatuk whispered, and again the great dog's ears pointed inquisitively. "This time I have brought you something." From a pocket Taatuk took sweet-sugar-coated biscuits. He tossed them forward and, as if worked by hidden springs, Mosqui went backwards a length.

"You will like them, Mosqui," Taatuk urged. "Eat them when I am gone."

Slowly Taatuk then retreated but, watching from a distance he saw Mosqui edge towards the biscuits, sniff and then gulp them.

"More proof he has known man," Taatauk told himself elatedly. "He has had dainties before. He is not afraid of man-scent. Some day I will make him mine."

Soon, if the saints were kind, he would have something which would love him. His whole body glowed with the thought as he continued homewards. But he had gone farther than he realized and his parents had almost finished the evening meal when he arrived. A fleeting disappointment showed on his father's face at first which quickly changed to anger as, getting to his feet, Joe seized him and shook him roughly.

"Where you been?" he demanded. "You go away and leave your chores. You want a whipping?"

"I—I just forgot the time," Taatuk pleaded.

"You—" Joe glared at him searchingly. "Say, maybe you find another kill, eh?"

Taatuk's eyes answered.

"Good!" his father exulted. "Eat quickly, for again we take rifle and lantern. How many now in pack?"

"Six," Taatuk replied as his mother placed food before him.

"Six," Joe grinned. "If I get all that will mean around another two hundred dollars, and get them I will, for they will stay in the district. Wolves always do."

Taatuk ate as slowly as he dared even while being urged to hurry by his father who meanwhile was preparing his rifle and skinning knife.

Taatuk agreed that killer wolves were a menace and should be destroyed, but his father would make no distinction between the wolves and Mosqui, so as he ate, as customary when sorely troubled, Taatuk offered up a silent prayer to the saints.

Perhaps the saints heeded his plea, for, as he pushed back his chair, an explosive *"Sacre!"* came from his father, now staring from a window. Taatuk also looked and a great thankfulness welled from his heart for it was now storming.

"I could not find the place in the storm," he said falteringly.

"No?" Joe eyed him savagely. "No, maybe you are right. Anyway, by the time we got there, they would be buried in their snow nests and would not move even if they heard us. But there will be other times. I will now excuse you many chores so that

you can spend more time trailing them. It will pay me well to do so. For the first time in more than fourteen years, you are of some use to me."

Taatuk did not warm to the words for he knew that only greed had prompted them.

All the next day it stormed and although his father cursed the blizzard bitterly, to Taatuk it offered a respite. As he went about his tasks he thought only of Mosqui. Several reasons might have caused the big dog to go wild but most likely it was the young killer-female who had lured him away. Yet, Taatuk felt, Mosqui was really lonely for the companionship of man; had not, perhaps, joined the wolves young enough to wholly become one of them. Perhaps at one time he had known kind treatment; had played around a post with children. Such were the dreams and hopes upon which Taatuk fed, thoughts that caused his eyes to glow.

HIS father, noting the glow, spoke of it to his squaw, but because neither of them had ever understood the aching loneliness of Taatuk's life or his sensitiveness, they could not understand. Had they known it was but whole-hearted yearning for a huge black dog, undoubtedly they would have harshly make mock of him.

So Taatuk did not tell them.

When the blizzard finally spent itself, the countryside was buried deep in many feet of fresh snow and Taatuk knew that he would now have to venture much farther from the post, for the wolves, now able to run down their food more easily, would retreat deeper into the timber. But his father had told him he could take more time off from his endless small chores if he wished to trail wolves, and right after breakfast suggested that Taatuk set out. Eagerly Taatuk strapped on his snowshoes.

But although the snow had ceased the bitter cold remained, cold that eats into a man's very vitals. Presently Taatuk wondered if he could stand much more but, fearing his father's anger if he returned too soon, kept on.

Later he forgot the cold as he came upon the telltale tracks where the wolves had taken after an elk, but this must have been an exceptionally strong and fleet young elk for, although he followed the trail for two miles, still he did not find where the deer had been pulled down but only traces of where the wolves had abandoned the chase and rested in the snow to recover their wind.

This fact caused Taatuk to halt and consider. Failing to have overtaken the elk the wolves would still be ravenous, and hungry wolves have been known, on rare occasions, to attack human beings. Alone there in the gloom of the snow-burdened evergreens Taatuk knew fear, for he was weaponless, his almost useless left hand having prevented him from learning to shoot a gun. Then from faraway came the dirge-like howling of the wolves, but it was not their hunting cry; instead they would be squatting in a circle on their haunches wailing their hunger to the high heavens.

That ominous sound caused Taatuk to retreat.

"So you found no kill?" his father asked suspiciously when he returned. "You sure?"

"Yes," Taatuk faltered, the memory of many bitter whippings still vivid.

His father said no more, but all through the evening meal he occasionally shot a doubting glance at Taatuk.

On the next two trips Taatuk also failed to come upon the pack, but the third time he did and again they had just fed. This time he felt certain that Mosqui was pleased to see him, ear cocked, plume straight up, eyes curious.

Four of the five wolves stood as before, glaring rigidly, but the young female he had adjudged to be Mosqui's mate and also the killer-wolf, started slithering towards him, almost flat on her belly, baleful unwinking eyes staring at him fixedly, and again Taatuk knew paralyzing fear, for she was crouching for the killer spring. If she pulled him down, then the others would immediately rush in, snarling, biting, ravening.

"Mosqui!" The plea came on a frightened sob. "You are not as they. Do not let them hurt me."

The big black could not possibly have un-

derstood the words, yet they caused him to turn his head. Then he sprang straight at his mate. Came a flurry of growls, snarls, uprearings and gnashing jaws, and then the female drew away.

The other wolves still stood as statues.

"Oh, Mosqui!" Tears of relief filled Taatuk's eyes. "Now I will leave you some more biscuits."

Taking them from a pocket he placed them upon the ground.

Later, at suppertime, he could not conceal his excitement and again had to guide his father to a kill. One more wolf fell to his father's rifle but his father was not satisfied.

"Why did you quickly switch the light from the big black leader to a smaller one?" he asked furiously.

Taatuk did not reply. To tell his father that Mosqui was a dog would only invite ridicule and the sneered question: "So? Well, as both sled dogs and wolves are about a size and run all shades of colors, then who can tell the difference between a wolf or a husky *pelt*? Dog, maybe, but alive he no good. Dead he means money to me."

THE next morning his father temporarily forgot the wolves when a dog-runner arrived with a sled load of supplies and word that he had been sent chiefly to break trail for John Vawn and his son, Jim, who would shortly arrive on an inspection visit. At once Joe started driving Meeswah and Taatuk hard. Everything had to be cleaned; stock and shelves dusted, floors scoured. Not until late that night did they finish.

Early the next morning Taatuk again set out and again he found Mosqui, now with his followers reduced to three; a dog and his mate and the female killer. Always had Taatuk loved the wild things but he now felt only hate and fear for the female for, knowing that wolves are monogamists, he knew that Mosqui would never leave her while she lived.

But this time Mosqui warily came forward a few steps and, as Taatuk tossed biscuits to the snow, his plume waved and he ate them at once, then lifting his great head mutely, pleaded for more.

Oh, Mosqui!" Taatuk breathed ecstatically. "The next time I will bring you a whole package."

As before the other wolves merely watched rigidly, but again the female started inching forward menacingly and only a growl from Mosqui halted her.

Definitely she was a born killer.

But at breakfast the next morning Joe said that which drained the color from Taatuk's face and the hope from his heart.

"We do not know when Mr. Vawn will arrive," he said, "and now there is not much to do around here, so today I follow you. The wolves do not run from you so perhaps I get the leader."

The horror that now flooded Taatuk showed in his eyes.

"Bah!" his father sneered. "Maybe you would like to keep them for pets, especially the big black one." He grinned craftily. "Well, your pets will all soon be dead and I shall be many dollars richer."

Knowing that his father was trailing no more than a hundred yards behind him, Taatuk later set out for the timber. But now he saw nothing of the virgin white beauty all about him; the woods had now become a place of death-tainted horror. His whole being shrank from death and violence for from experience he had learned that even the wild things would respond to kindness and gentleness. His snowshoes seemed weighted with lead as he mushed forward.

Presently he again came to tracks where Mosqui and his followers had taken off after a moose. But when he came to the kill there was no sign of the wolves, only a confusion of tracks, but knowing they would not be far away from such a fresh kill he called softly: "Mosqui! Mosqui!"

Came a slight stirring of snow and then the big black came slowly forward from where he had been sleeping. His mate and the other two wolves also stood up but they did not approach.

Looking behind him, Taatuk could neither see nor hear his father but he knew he was there, stealing forward ghost-like from cover to cover. Coming forward against the slight breeze.

And then Taatuk saw his father and

stark dread engulfed him. Joe was behind a tree barely twenty paces distant, kneeling to steady his aim, and he was aiming at Mosqui. Something snapped in Taatuk.

"No, no!" he shrilled, running towards Mosqui, arms outspread protectively. "Run, Mosqui! Oh, run!" For even as he cried out the rifle thundered. But as Taatuk had started running forward Mosqui had retreated a length and turned his head sharply. The bullet aimed to strike him full in the center of his broad forehead instead furrowed along one side of his skull. Mosqui wavered, collapsed, became still.

Livid with rage Joe cursed luridly, then with: "This time I finish him," levered another cartridge into the breech of his gun.

"No, no!" Now at the fallen Mosqui's side Taatuk turned, white-faced and quivering, his eyes great pools of shock and horror. "If you shoot him, you first shoot me!"

His father's eyes now gleamed insanely.

"Maybe that okay," he said thinly. "An accident. As I try to shoot wolf attacking you, I accidentally hit you. You never no good to me."

IN TERROR, Taatuk saw that which wellnigh paralyzed him. At the roar of the shot the other two wolves had loped away, but the female killer, Mosqui's mate, had remained. Belly flat to the snow, eyes baleful, she was inching forward behind Joe.

"Father!" Taatuk screamed agonizingly. "Behind you! The big black's mate!"

"A trick," his father sneered. "She ran with the others. Now—" He aimed again.

At that moment, a raging incarnation of savagery, the female sprang. The cartridge exploded but the bullet went wild as the rifle was knocked whirling from Joe's hands.

Flat on his back, with desperate hands, Joe McDougal clutched at a furry throat. The female's jaws clashed together bare inches from his windpipe. But at best snowshoes are cumbersome and now Joe's feet were hopelessly entangled, preventing his getting to his feet or getting his feet under the female's belly in order to use the greater strength of his legs to hurl her aside. His grip on her throat tightened but the strength of his arms alone was not enough to hold her off. Again and again the wolf's teeth and claws raked his shoulders and chest.

"The rifle!" Joe screamed despairingly.

Taatuk had already picked it up even as with the gradual weakening of his father's arms the female's fangs came closer and closer to Joe's throat.

Never before having fired a gun Taatuk did the best he could. Coming right up to the combatants, holding the butt of the rifle against his stomach, Taatuk pointed the muzzle at the female's head, but before he could press the trigger her fangs scrunched into Joe's windpipe.

In that same instant Taatuk fired. The recoil sent him sprawling backwards. As the bullet crashed into her brain the female gave a convulsive spring that freed her from Joe's death clutch. She died even as Taatuk scrambled hurriedly to his feet.

He heard shouts and was dimly aware of the two men running forward. John Vawn and his son.

"Decided to follow you to look into this wolf business for ourselves," John Vawn panted, "and— Dear God Almighty!" He pulled up short at the sight before him. Then he and Jim dropped to their knees beside Joe.

"Finished," John Vawn said quietly as they presently got to their feet. His arm went about the now sobbing Taatuk. "Try and tell us what happened, boy." Sobbing, trembling, Taatuk explained.

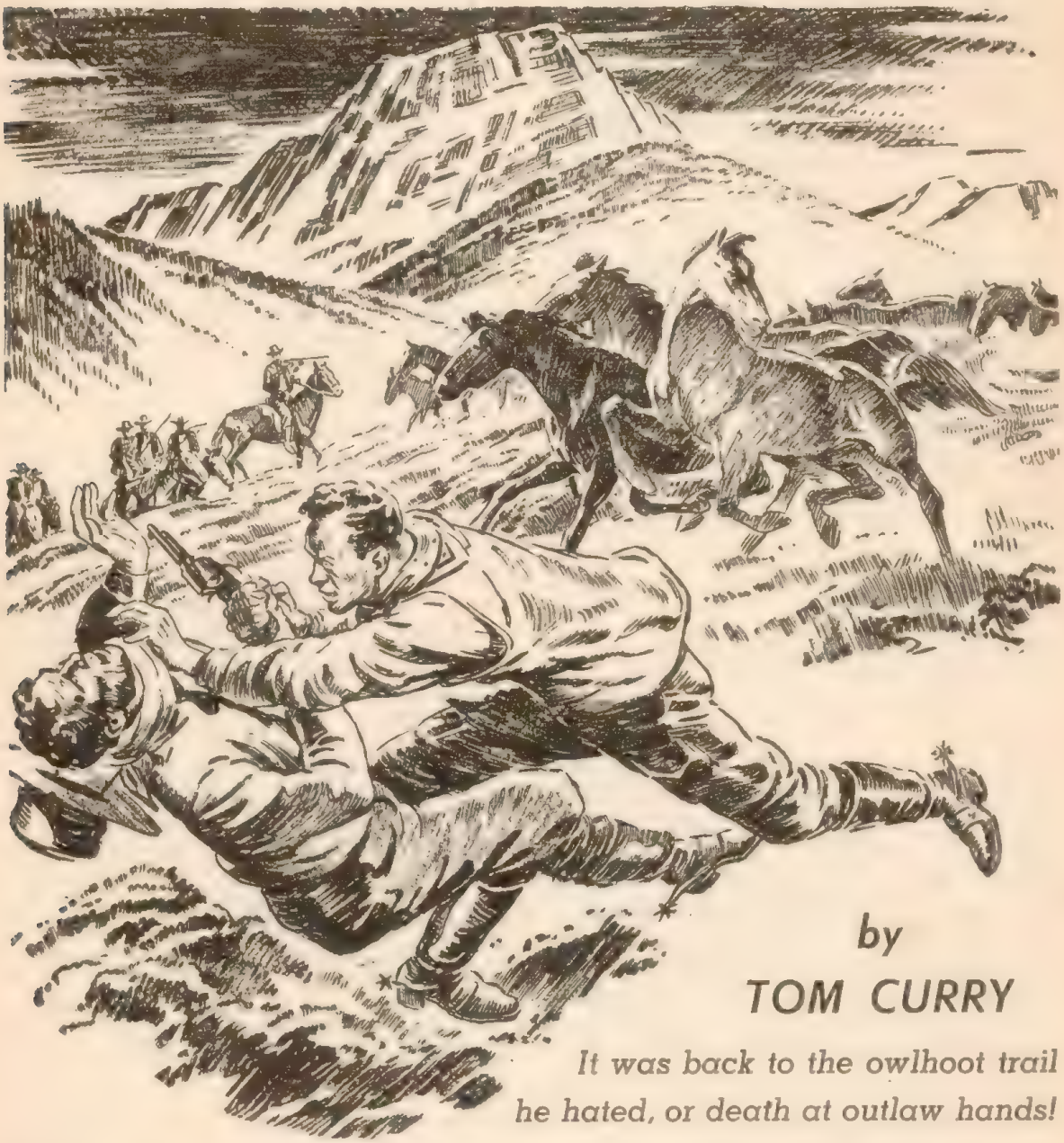
"A dog!" Crossing to the side of Mosqui, John Vawn examined him. "Just a scalp wound," he said. "He'll recover, but what then?"

"Look at the size of him," Jim answered. "The boy will be able to tame him and think what he'll mean for breeding purposes. We'll tie him up and come back later with sleds for him and Joe."

"You're right," John Vawn agreed and again his arm went about Taatuk. "You now have no father," he said gently, "and your mother we'll send back to her tribe. So now, if you like, you can live with us and look after our kennels and the big black. Would you like to do that?"

The wonderful glow showing through the tears in Taatuk's eyes gave John Vawn his answer.

THAT BLIND TRAIL



by
TOM CURRY

It was back to the owlhoot trail he hated, or death at outlaw hands!

JEFF DUNN awoke with a start and before his eyes, the color of volcano ash, were fully open, he had snatched up his Colt six-shooter and thrust it under the nose of the man bending over him.

He said nothing but hooked his thumb over the cocked revolver hammer.

"What's eating you, son? I just want you to ride to Juperstown-for me!"

It was the ranch owner, Frank Gerdes, stoutish and with salt in his hair. His seamed fame was lined by years of hard work, deeply weathered by the sun and winds of the four seasons.

"I—I was having a nightmare, Frank," muttered Dunn, quickly putting down his pistol. He was ashamed of the nervousness he had displayed.

"The boys are out working the traps, Jeff," went on Gerdes, accepting Dunn's explanation. "I savvy you had a long tour at the pens last night but maybe you're rested by now."

"Yes, sir. I'll saddle Bruno right off." Dunn swung his long legs off the bunk, stood up, and donned his leather pants. He was taller than Gerdes, for when he put on his Stetson, his hat crown brushed the bunkhouse rafters.

"My wife needs a fresh bottle of medicine mighty bad, Jeff," Gerdes said, "and there's a couple of other things. I wrote you a list, son, and just tell Angus McDowell to charge it to me."

"Yes, sir."

Gerdes was the Boss. Dunn had been with him over a year and had come to respect and admire the owner of the Straight G. Gerdes was a good man, a law-abiding citizen of the Lone Star state. He had a Bible and what's more he read it regularly, as all the bronc busters and others who worked for him could testify.

Jeff Dunn was well-fleshed, a big, strong youth. He had tight curling chestnut hair showing under his canted hat and his face was of an innocent, almost cherubic cast. But his gray eyes were expressionless; he had trained himself never to show emotion.

HE TRAILED Gerdes into the sunlit yard. The house was on the rise over Poorhouse Creek and the range was rolling, with ridges on the east and timbered mountains westward bounding the valley. The mustangs liked to come down and graze after dark but during the day they stayed in the cool forests. Now Gerdes was collecting a big band for shipment. His riders were in the hills, hazing the horses into cleverly camouflaged traps, where they could be ridden and tamed a bit, then driven to the corrals prior to the coming drive. The Straight G was almost ready for this big event. The drive would be the fruition of two years' hard work and planning.

Dunn adjusted the pad, an especially soft one for Bruno, cinched on his expensive saddle, and donned his cartridge belt and Colt with its fancy Mexican holster. Mounting, he headed down the winding trail to Juperstown.

The shadows were long as Jeff Dunn swung Bruno into the dusty main street. This was the center of the town, where lines of wooden buildings with sun awnings extended over the raised boardwalks. Gnarled live oaks grew here, and further on there was an iron watering trough set near the blacksmith shop.

Evening was at hand. Citizens showed in doorways, while saddled horses stood at the hitchrails. Some lamps had been lighted and a piano was being played in "Pete's Oasis."

Passing the big honkytonk Dunn dropped Bruno's reins over the rail in front of the general store and went inside with the list Gerdes had given him. The elderly Scotch storekeeper set about filling the order.

Jeff Dunn waited. He took the items handed him by Angus McDowell, bought himself some crackers, cheese and two cans of peaches, and then went out. He stowed Gerdes' things in his saddle-bags and sat on the end of the store porch to eat his supper. While he was there, night dropped down like a purple curtain.

"Stretch my legs," Dunn muttered, and strolled down the line to the Oasis. He stood outside, looking through the open main doors at the revelry, the yellow shaft from the saloon falling on his grave young face.

Dunn missed little of what went on near him. A man stepped from a doorway and came toward him.

"Howdy, Jeff," he said in a cool voice.

"Howdy, Potter," Dunn answered, just as coldly.

Blackie Potter was tall, lean and elegant in a black suit and knotted stringtie at the collar of his white ruffled shirt. The toes of his boots, polished to perfection, showed beneath his trousers legs. Beneath his flat-topped hat his dark cynical eyes surveyed Dunn. Potter was a professional gambler. Inwardly Jeff Dunn was surprised that Potter had bothered to speak.

"Come in back and have a drink on me,

Jeff," said Potter, in a casual manner.

"No, thanks. I got to hurry back with some medicine for Mrs. Gerdes. Another time."

Potter took no offense at the refusal. "Just for a jiffy, Jeff. It won't take a minute." The gambler's white teeth gleamed in the light from the bar.

Dunn shrugged and followed the gambler along the side of Pete's and through a rear entrance. Potter led him up a flight of narrow steps to the second floor, then to the front again where he tapped twice on a closed door.

A bolt was withdrawn and Potter went in. After a brief hesitation, keyed up and ready for anything except what happened, Jeff Dunn stepped just inside the private room. Two curtained windows overlooked the main street and plaza, and the room was furnished with a table, bed, chairs, with gear lying around.

Jeff Dunn now saw the grinning, rough looking man who had let them in. The rough man's wide face was wreathed in a smile that disclosed the large yellow buck teeth. He wore easy old blue pants and a flannel shirt open at his hairy throat. His thick waist was circled by a cartridge belt holding a brace of silver-mounted Colts.

FOR ONCE Jeff Dunn's equanimity deserted him as he gasped, "Kicker!"

"You little rascal! Am I glad to see you!" Kicker threw a heavy arm across Dunn's shoulders and hugged him.

Potter shut the door and carefully bolted it.

Terry "Kicker" Burnell was fifteen years older than Jeff Dunn. He was a rough diamond, always smiling, always deadly. He didn't look tough but the nickname was expressive. The nickname was one the old bunch had used and it meant that Burnell would shoot a man just to see him kick. Dunn had known Burnell to do it more than once.

"Take the load off your boots, Jeff," ordered Kicker. "We'll talk."

Dunn sat down on the edge of a chair. Blackie joined them at the round table, with a bottle and glasses all ready.

"I thought you—" began Dunn.

Ever smiling, his limpid eyes wreathed by wrinkles of apparent good humor, Kicker Burnell broke in to finish for him: "—thought I was in jail. Well, I was, but not for long. I got out, Jeff, just like you did. The judge gave me thirty years, but the boys bribed everybody in sight and I got a chance to break loose. I drifted this way, same as you. I was stony broke. But a kind pard in this town staked me and hid me."

Kicker winked and Blackie Potter smirked, caressing his pencil-line mustache between his thumb and a long forefinger.

No one observing Jeff Dunn would have known that inside him was raging an awful turmoil. Stark fear, hatred, dread, the worst emotions surged in his mind. The nightmare had come true: Kicker had found him.

"How did you learn where I was, Kicker?" he asked casually.

"How? I didn't. I been hiding here in Blackie's room and a while ago I looked out the window and saw you ride by cool and easy. I pointed you to Blackie and I asked him to fetch you in. Am I glad!" Kicker poured out drinks, and Dunn tossed his off at a single gulp, feeling he needed it.

Burnell rubbed his strong hands, hands that had killed again and again in cold blood without provocation. He was still smiling, always smiling, this grinning outlaw who had taken Jeff Dunn as a boy and taught him to be a thief.

Dunn knew what was coming and steeled himself. "I been living quiet-like, Kicker." He met his former master's gaze and there was a psychological struggle between them.

Blackie Potter broke it, his mustache twitching nervously. "I told you he was straight, Burnell," he warned anxiously.

"Listen, Blackie, this boy's good, didn't I say so? You think I'd monkey with him if he wasn't? Why, I'd put a slug right through his guts here and now if I didn't savvy him. Shucks, I taught him everything he knows. Ain't that right, Jeff?"

Jeff Dunn nodded.

"Look at him," laughed Kicker. "Why, he's got a map like an angel; 'Babyface' they called him! He looks so innocent, he'd have

to stick a gun against you and pull trigger before you'd believe he's the toughest horse thief in Texas. Here's how we always work it: his young honest face gets him a job on a ranch and he furnishes inside information, and then I ride in with my men and run off the horses. We need a man at the Straight G, I said so, didn't I? Well, Jeff's already set there, it's perfect. All he's got to do is set up the old signals and we'll go in and get those mustangs. Potter's tip is good, ain't it, Jeff? They say Gerdes has penned every mustang he owns that's ripe for sale."

Jeff Dunn shoved his glass over for another drink, dropping his eyelids. He needed a moment to catch his breath.

JEFF DUNN was careful to hide what he was thinking from Kicker Burnell. He knew better than to reveal how greatly that close call had shocked him; how he had sat in that cell and reviewed his owlhoot life; how he had foreseen the inevitable end—a gallows tree and a noose. And when, by a lucky chance, he had gotten free, Dunn had resolved, from that time on, to ride the open trail. Out at the Straight G ranch he had tarried long enough to form firm friendships that he valued, while Frank Gerdes, the owner, was a square man who trusted him. Dunn had no intention of betraying that trust.

But he could not tell this to Kicker, for Kicker would have shot him through the heart.

Jeff Dunn tossed down a second drink. "Well, Kicker, I'm mighty glad you're back in circulation. I was hoping you'd make it."

Burnell watched him, grinning, his eyes slitted, perhaps all in mirth and joy. "What did I tell you, Blackie?" he cried. "He's my boy."

Dunn shoved back his chair, kicking his chair around. His manner was professional. "If you want my advice, Kicker, you'll hold off another two days. They're only a mile south of the buildings on this side of the river."

He knew he wasn't telling Kicker anything the outlaw didn't know already.

"How many men on after dark?" Kicker asked.

"Never more than two. Gerdes has no idea of danger. I can get on night tour."

"That'll be perfect. You take care of the other sentry and we won't have to fire a shot."

"The quieter the better," said Dunn, preparing to leave. "Well, it will be good to get back on the old stand, Kicker."

"Have another before you ride, Jeff."

"No, thanks."

Later, Dunn rode back to the Straight G. The ranch owner was in the living room, a lamp going and the big family Bible in his lap. Dunn silently handed him the packages he had been sent for and Gerdes thanked him. "Better get some shuteye, son. Hard day tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

Jeff Dunn went outside. His new saddle had cost him ten months' wages but he had a little cash. To have asked for what Gerdes owed him would have tipped his hand. Dunn could pack all else he owned in his saddlebags and he did so, then attached his carbine holster and led his horse away from the buildings before mounting. He moved slowly so Gerdes would not hear the hoofbeats. Once he looked back at the yellow-lighted windows of the house.

By midnight he was miles away. He paused to rest his horse, getting down to smoke. He squatted there, the tiny ruby point of his cigarette bright in the darkness. He was thinking about Gerdes, who had taken him on and asked no questions.

At least Bruno lowered his long head and nuzzled Dunn's cheek.

"Yeah, Bruno, I can see just how Kicker will bring it off," Jeff murmured. "First he'll bite his teeth because I run out on him. He'll check mighty careful to find if I warned Gerdes and then he'll strike. Just before dawn, Kicker will creep in with his gunhands and they'll kill the night men before they savvy what hit 'em!"

Dunn had been on too many forays with Kicker not to be familiar with the horse thief's tactics. Their faces blacked, silent in the blackness, picked raiders would gather up the penned mustangs and drive them southward at full gallop. By dawn they would be many miles away. Within a few

short days the stolen horses would be sold, with a forged bill-of-sale of every mustang.

Dunn mashed out his smoke in the sandy earth. For a time he stood by Bruno's head, not moving. When Kicker Brunell had come back into Dunn's life, Dunn had started to run away, without a word to Gerdes. But such a problem can't be settled by running away. Sooner or later Kicker would find Dunn. At the thought, Dunn felt physically sick and tried to ascribe it to the unusual amount of redeye he had drunk. But it wasn't that. He was afraid.

WHEN the outlaw chief found out Jeff was siding with the enemy, the prime objective in his life would be to kill Jeff Dunn. Dunn knew how Kicker went about such vengeance.

"I got to decide, here and now," he told Bruno. . . .

At last he mounted his horse and rode slowly back toward the Straight G ranch house.

Two nights later Jeff was guarding the Gerdes horse herd.

The mustangs in the corrals on the river flats were up, hunting what grass was left. Meadow hay, brought out by wagon, had been dumped in to supplement the forage. The animals could drink at a shallow inlet pond but the corrals were enclosed on four sides. The dark shapes showed, many in small bunches, standing at all angles. Some were dark, others of pinto strain or white-streaked, coats shaggy. There were so many in the pens that at all times some would be stamping or snorting, with an occasional nipping bee or kicking duel going on.

Jeff Dunn sat a Straight G mount—he had left Bruno safe in the ranch corrals. Around on the south fence, Red Leland was slowly patrolling. Leland was a youthful bronc buster, and Gerdes had assigned him with Dunn for that tour.

Dunn stared at the black wall to the east, a natural wall where the ridges closed in the valley, the hillsides clothed in brush and patches of woods. There the shadow was so dense nothing could be seen against it. From that direction Kicker would no doubt send in his scouts, to check up.

Dunn didn't know who the rank-and-file of the thieves were. But such were always available, in any town.

Jeff Dunn was worried. He knew that he and Red Leland had been under surveillance, that they showed against the sky. So would other waiting riders or even figures lying on the ground. He had been in touch with Kicker Burnell and Potter since he had turned around and gone back to the Straight G.

Just to frighten off the thieves wouldn't do the trick. And trying to catch Burnell himself would be like trying to hold on in the darkness to a slimy eel.

As well as he knew Kicker's methods and forewarned as he was, Dunn couldn't spot the approach. The first thing he knew, a man whistled at him and he jumped, swinging that way. All he saw was what might have been a darker patch of ground only yards away and he had heard nothing save the restless little noises of the numerous mustangs.

"All right, everything's clear," said Dunn, voice low. He walked his horse along the fence. "Say, Red," he sang out. "Come here."

Leland pulled his rein and trotted around the fence to him. "Reach, Leland!" snapped Dunn. "You'll catch lead if you try for your gun."

Red couldn't believe it as he saw the Colt aimed at him, and he said so. "Have you gone loco, Jeff? Cut out the joking!"

Dunn cursed him. "I'll show you who's joking! Reach!"

Red obeyed. "What's the idea, Jeff? I got my hands up. What you aim to do?"

"Dry up. Keep your hands high and hop off."

Under the steady pistol Red did as he was told. Dunn had disengaged a toe from his tapped stirrup and swinging over his leg, jumped down. In a single motion he whipped away Red's Colt. "Hands behind you!" he snapped, and fastened Leland's wrists. He spoke to the shadow: "Tell Kicker everything's set." With expert speed he gagged Red, led the bronc buster down the line and secured him to a fence post, then hurried back to his horse.

There were more around, boring in, silent figures stealing to the pens, guns in hand. Faces and hands had been blacked to kill sheen, while boots, hats, cartridge belts, anything that might clink or rattle had been left with their mounts. They ranged here and there, making sure it wasn't a trap. Kicker never took unnecessary chances.

Jeff Dunn had a queer feeling. By this time half a dozen of Kicker's scouts had gathered by him and he couldn't watch them all. A steel gun muzzle was rammed into his spine. "Stand quiet," warned his captor, and they took his Colt. The stealthy checkers were reporting all clear. A match was struck and extinguished by waving it in an arc through the night air, one of Kicker's favorite signals.

RIDERS broke from the black ridge wall, leading the mounts of those who were afoot. There were fifteen or twenty men, among them Kicker Burnell and Blackie Potter.

"What's the idea, Kicker?" demanded Dunn aggrievedly. "Your men put me under the gun. I did just what you told me."

"You sure did," laughed Burnell. "You sure did, boy. I was a little leery, that's all, just a feeling, and Potter was worried, too. The fact you behaved yourself all this time would make a fool wonder, wouldn't it? After all, you could have lit out with a nice little bunch of horses all for yourownself any time. And then, you hid from me, too. But like I told Blackie, you were afeared not to string along with me on this job. Later you could take your cut and run."

Jeff Dunn didn't argue. He knew that Kicker had made up his mind to kill him. Having showed his hand, Kicker couldn't afford to take any chances on Dunn. He would be left behind, dead. He had just experienced one of Burnell's famed double-doublecrosses, as Burnell gleefully termed them.

Then Kicker, in a sharp voice, cried, "I smell fresh dirt!"

Dunn instantly reached. It was a trained but frantic move. He launched himself at Burnell, flattened out, every muscle of his strong body behind that lunge. A gun exploded behind Jeff and he felt metal tear the fleshy part of his left thigh. It shocked him but didn't stop him. As Jeff's arms circled Kicker's knees, his weight knocking Burnell flat, Dunn bellowed, "Fire, fire!"

Many of the horse thieves were bunched there. A strange sound, the dull slide of dirt, turned them. A section of ground rose and in the faint, slowly but surely growing light, glinted the rifle barrels thrust from the pit.

"Throw down!" shouted Frank Gerdes.

"Fire!" screeched Dunn, desperately trying to hold the powerful Burnell and at the same time avoid the outlaw's gun muzzle.

Burnell's friends couldn't shoot into Dunn, locked with the chief, without hitting Kicker but that wouldn't hold good for many seconds. Blackie Potter was moaning, "I knew it, I knew it!"

"You rat!" gritted Burnell, in his fury. He had his Colt in his right hand and was trying to get it around so he could blow out Jeff Dunn's life.

Dunn was younger but Burnell was trickier, an expert rough-and-tumble scrapper. Dunn knew he could lose out any instant. He took a chance, trying a trick Kicker had shown him in the old days, suddenly relaxing so Burnell came forward under his own steam and the gun hand moved around. That also involuntarily relaxed Burnell's arm muscles for a moment and Dunn timed it, snatching for the wrist and twisting Burnell's weapons inward. The Colt roared, flame and metal. Dunn's forearm was seared.

That started the fight. Rifles blasted from the deep pit and a fusillade ripped the thieves. They were rattled by the cowboy guns and began shooting, but some turned and ran for their horses.

Dunn kept close to the quivering Kicker. He felt for the silver-studded Colt and tore it from the loosened fingers. Burnell was trying to swear but couldn't breathe very well. Over him, the two sides were trading lead but defeat of the outlaws was a foregone conclusion, with Kicker down, and Blackie Potter running away.

The flaming guns changed angles as the outlaws split off. Gerdes and all the cow-

boys he had swarmed from the pit they had dug right after dark the evening before. They had worked fast, the Straight G, throwing the free dirt into a hay wagon so it could be carted off, fashioning a roof of boards for the pit, and finally sodding it over so the section looked undisturbed. Jeff Dunn had worked it out as the only method to catch Kicker Burnell.

SEVERAL Straight G bronc busters threw rope halters on mustangs from the pens. They hadn't dared keep their own horses near for that would have been a giveaway. Bareback, they tore after the running outlaws. Guns were going, blazing in the gray dawn.

Red Leland, who had volunteered as Dunn's partner in the dangerous game, was released and joined the steeplechase.

Jeff Dunn came to his knees, holding one of Burnell's pet Colts. The bandit targets were out of his range and he knelt there, staring at the contorted face of the man who had brought him up, brought him up the wrong way. He hated Burnell and aimed the gun at the outlaw's head but he didn't shoot. He hoped Kicker would die but could hear his teeth grinding between his pain-wracked lips.

It had been smashed, this attempt to steal the Straight G mustangs. Frank Gerdes came limping back, a rifle in his hands. "I got Blackie Potter, son," he said, squatting beside Dunn.

"Yes, sir. This is Kicker Burnell, the meanest horse thief this side of any line."

Burnell opened his eyes and then his mouth. Maybe he had been holding on just for this, just to ruin Jeff Dunn.

"Mister!" gasped Kicker. "This young cuss, Dunn, is a wanted outlaw. Reward for him—Cochise County, Arizona—he'll cross you, steal your eyes—I savvy him. . . ."

The other men were out there, chasing the outlaws, catching some, gunning those who resisted. Thieves who had broken clear were racing for the tall timber.

Burnell wanted to wreck Dunn if it took his last breath. "Don't trust him, mister, don't trust him. Used to send him to a ranch—he'd take their grub and then tip me. Done it to you tonight—guided us in—but figured he'd get it all for himself—later—"

Kicker Burnell shuddered and his body flexed so his weight rested on the top of his bared head and his booted feet, the high heels dug in.

Then he went limp and lay there, his chips all cashed.

"What he said is true," said Jeff Dunn. "Except I never would cheat you. He put that in so you'd turn me over to the law for sure."

"He's done for, Jeff, and so is Potter. From what you told me last night, they're the only ones in this who knew about your past."

The light had freshened and they stared at each other in the dissipating mists off the river. Gerdes looked at the grim face of Jeff Dunn, too old for his years. The rancher spoke slowly, distinctly. "Once there was a young fellow lost his parents. He went wild like some will, for a boy without a decent guide is adrift on a dangerous, blind trail. No telling where he'll end up if he ain't shown the right path."

JEFF thought Gerdes was talking about him.

"This boy I'm telling you about," continued Gerdes, "went on the road and pretty soon he was as ornery a little cuss as the state of Colorado could furnish."

Dunn inwardly started; he had never been in Colorado.

"Then, just before it was too late, an hombre caught this kid and tamed him. He was just a miner in the lead workings but he had the right idea and set that brat to it, and ever since, that boy has stayed on the line. He even reads the Bible now and again. Another boy had to figure it out for himself and he finally straightened himself out, which is a sight harder."

Jeff Dunn felt a sudden easing of his inner tension, and fresh hope swept him. "But you heard what Kicker Burnell said."

Gerdes shook his head. "Coundn't make out what the sidewinder was babbling about, Jeff. Come on, let's clean up around here and get on home. Mama will have some hot breakfast and coffee waiting for us." • • •

The sergeant wanted action—and he got plenty of it he didn't expect

As the Apache dashed toward him, Homer pulled the trigger

The Valiant Are Lucky

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

THE report of the retreat gun echoed around the deep cup of hills encircling Fort Conroy. Quartermaster Sergeant Homer Keene's chest swelled against his tight blouse. It had taken him a long time to get assigned to frontier duty and two months at lonely Fort Conroy had not dulled his hunger for action against the Apache.

The trumpets sounded. Sergeant Homer Keene rode past in review with Headquarters Company and then cantered to the stables. The blue lines of K and L Companies pounded past. K Company, the black horse company, swung toward the stables. Among the lean horsemen one figure stood out, in Sergeant Keene's estimation—Sergeant Dan O'Malley—who was *the* picture of a frontier trooper.

Homer swung from his saddle and stood for a moment breathing deeply and drinking in the wild loneliness of the distant mountains. Fleecy clouds drifted high above Peloncillo Peak. It was so quiet and peaceful. For months there had been nothing but routine patrols and duties at Fort Conroy. It was as though the district had been abandoned forever by the Chiricahuas.

Homer's gaze went beyond the peak and then he turned his head swiftly to stare at it again. Two puffs of white cloud seemed to form just above the peak in the clear twilight sky. Someone stopped beside him. It was O'Malley.

Homer Keene pointed to the peak. "Curious cloud formation, that," he observed. He never seemed quite at ease when O'Malley was about.

O'Malley slanted his dress helmet lower over his eyes. He stood for a long moment staring at the peak. "Cloud formation? Those are smoke signals, Keene. It looks like our holidays are over." He looked at Homer and grinned. "Hot, ain't it?"

HOMER watched O'Malley stride swiftly towards headquarters. He had a knack of making Homer Keene feel small. He looked again at the peak. Another puff of white smoke blossomed up swiftly. His stomach churned uneasily. His throat dried up. He had heard enough of Taza and his *broncho* Chiricahuas and Tontos from the post veterans. They weren't stories calculated to give one a good night's rest. Suddenly the quiet land seemed impregnated with a brooding menace. He looked back over his shoulder as he led his horse to the stables as though Taza were sitting high on Peloncillo Peak watching Homer Keene personally.

Homer led his claybank to its stall. Being in Headquarters Company had its advantages, but they rode the off color horses—the roans, claybanks, piebalds and buckskins. It had tagged them with their nickname of The Brindles. Homer rode a striped claybank named Zebra. He longed for a sleek black.

Susan Carstens, only daughter of Jim Carstens, topkick of K, was standing near headquarters. Homer wished he was in comfortable undress blues. He did not have the figure for the braid festooned blouse and the plumed dress helmet looked positively silly on him.

"Hello, Homer," she said. "Were those smoke signals?"

He nodded. "O'Malley has gone to tell the major."

Her eyes widened but she did not seem afraid. She was *army*. "Don't forget dinner tonight, Homer. I'll need some coaching in my part for post theatricals."

"I've been looking forward to it all week."

"Dan O'Malley is coming too."

Homer straightened himself and pulled in his slight paunch. He might have known O'Malley would be there. "We may have field duty soon," he said seriously. "I hope it will not interfere too much with our plans."

"Sergeant Keene!" a voice called.

It was Lieutenant Marbury, post quartermaster. He nodded to Susan. "Please excuse us, Miss Carstens." He came close to Homer and said: "Any hospital supplies in today's freight?"

"A few items, sir."

Marbury lowered his voice but Homer was sure Susan could hear. "Any bedpans?"

"Yes, sir. Three, although we had ordered five. I filled out a request for the remainder. If you sign it tonight it will go out by mail courier tomorrow."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Keene."

As Marbury strode away Homer felt his face redden.

Susan smiled. "You don't get much time away from your duties."

"No. But then supply has always been a problem on the frontier."

O'Malley paused at the Headquarters' door and then turned toward them. Homer made a hasty excuse and hurried off. He did not want O'Malley standing next to him. The comparison was too painful. He tried to conceal his slight limp as he went to the quarters he shared with Farrier Corporal Tim McKenna.

Tim was dozing on his bunk. He opened

one bleary eye. "And how are ye, me boy?"

"Disgusted, Tim."

Homer pulled off his dress blouse and helmet and sat down on his bunk. He stared at the floor.

McKenna sat up. "Ye've been talkin' with the topkick's daughter again."

"I've just *got* to get out of supply."

The farrier shook his gray head. "When Mr. Marbury saw your record from Jefferson Barracks ye were doomed."

Homer groaned. "It's taken me years to get out on field duty. Now I'm stuck in supply again with a chance for action coming up." He looked up at Tim. "You saw a great deal of action in the war, didn't you?"

McKENNA waggled his head. "Aye. Gettysburg, Yellow Tavern and a few other nasty places."

"You must be proud to be a veteran of them."

"Oh, I was gettin' past the prideful stage, then. When I was with old Fuss and Feathers at Churubusco and Chapultepec 'twas different."

"Two great wars," said Homer enviously.

"Then I had a few brushes with the Kiowas and the Apaches and a Comanche or two. 'Tis most disturbin' to an old man who likes his pipe and bottle." As though he had jogged his memory he reached under his bunk and pulled out a squat black bottle. He offered it to Homer. "*Tulapai.* Indian potcheen. Kicks like a forty-five seventy."

"No, thanks."

McKenna took a long pull. He closed his eyes. "This fightin' business has been botherin' ye, son. Ye were in the war?"

"I left Philadelphia in 'Sixty-one as a corporal in the Keystone Zouaves."

Tim opened one eye. "So?"

"We knew, of course, we'd be the first to enter Richmond."

Tim snorted, and Homer continued:

"We advanced toward Bull Run after the battle started. Before we heard the firing we were overrun by a mob of panicky troops. They shouted that the battle was lost, that the Black Horse Cavalry was just behind them, that we'd be cut to pieces by masked batteries. We were green. We bolted too. I was run over by a sutler's cart. Broke my leg in two places. The sutler was sorry and gave me a bottle of fine cognac to toast my first battle. The leg would not heal just right. I was assigned to supply duty at Alexandria. I did a good job. *Too* good. I was there when the war ended; never heard a shot fired. After the war I went home to Philadelphia to get married. I arrived there the same day the Keystone Zouaves did. Their colors were riddled and stained with the battle smoke of The Seven Days, Cedar Mountain, Groveton, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Cold Harbor, Petersburg and Five Forks. My fiancée was impressed."

Tim opened his eyes.

"She married the Color Sergeant of the Zouaves," said Homer softly.

"And you reenlisted."

"At Jefferson Barracks and asked for immediate duty on the frontier."

"And—?"

"Spent six years in supply at Jefferson Barracks."

McKenna nodded. "I knew it! 'Tis easy to train horse soldiers—the horse does the work. But a man must be born to supply."

"When I finally did get out here, Lieutenant Marbury shoved me into supply."

McKenna drew at the bottle. "Well, never fear. Ye may have your wish yet. If they drive Taza and his *broncho* Chiricahuas down this way ye'll likely see action. And as for the lass: ye do have a fine rival in O'Malley, 'tis true. He's an Irishman like meself, mind. But she likes ye too. Ye do not drown yourself in spirits; ye know the fine arts, so to speak. Women set great store on those things too."

HOMER shrugged. McKenna looked at him speculatively. "And the fine bottle of cognac? Ye succumbed to its vile temptation of course without seeing a battle?"

"It's still in my footlocker. It's a sort of talisman to me now. I'll not touch it except to toast my first battle."

McKenna sighed and lay down.

Homer looked into the mirror and smoothed his thinning hair. Susan had once

told him he had the eyes and mouth of an artist. He sighed and put on his forage cap. Try as he would he could never achieve O'Malley's rakish tilt.

Dinner at the Carstens was a highly prized invitation. For men who ate army fare regularly, it was little short of Paradise. Homer said little until he had finished his apple pie. Apple pie in a wilderness where apples were as rare as promotion. He mentioned this to Susan.

"Flavored soda crackers, Homer. Mother taught me her secrets."

Jim Carstens smiled. "She left all her skill to you."

O'Malley leaned back with a satisfied air. He grinned at Susan. "There's no doubt about it. A soldier needs a wife to come home to."

Homer bit his lip. While he was talking about apple pie, O'Malley was talking about marriage. Homer Keene never seemed to time his words right.

Later Homer went over the part Susan was to have in the post play. Her brown hair touched his shoulder and a faint fragrance drifted to him. He could hardly talk sensibly. He was thirty-three, and she but a girl of twenty, yet he felt clumsy and foolish beside her.

Carstens and O'Malley were discussing the war. It had been over for seven years and to all except veterans it was all but forgotten in daily talk.

Carstens leaned back in his chair. "You served in Virginia, too, eh Keene?"

"Yes," answered Homer uncomfortably.

"Cavalry?" persisted the topkick.

"Infantry."

Carstens was not to be denied. He collected the war records of other men as avidly as some men collect stamps. "What regiment?"

"Keystone Zouaves."

Homer knew Carstens was mentally thumbing through the files of his remarkable memory, standard equipment for all first sergeants.

"Ah—" said Carstens slowly, "I mind it was at Groveton—no—ah! Cedar Mountain! August 'Sixty-two. The Keystone Zouaves broke the line of the Stonewall Brigade itself and drove them, crumpling the rebel left in the woods."

"Right," said Homer drily.

"Were you hit at Cedar Mountain, Keene?" O'Malley glanced at Homer's leg.

Now was the time for Homer to casually wave off any references to his experiences. Susan's eyes were on him. He could not do it. "No. I was injured at First Manassas."

"There was hard fightin' there along Bull Run Creek," said O'Malley softly.

Homer looked desperately at Susan hoping she would change the subject but she whispered: "I *know* you'd rather talk about your experiences, Homer."

He dragged deeply at his cigar. "I was run over by a sutler's cart in the retreat and my leg was broken."

O'MALLEY looked at him queerly. "But you saw action later?"

Homer shook his head. "I served out the war in a warehouse on the Alexandria waterfront."

Well, it was done. Let them worry the bones as much as they liked. Lies always came home to roost. It would have been much worse later on if they had found out for themselves.

The two veterans looked enigmatically at Homer. He avoided Susan's eyes and asked for his cap. "It's about time I left. Lieutenant Marbury wants some paper work done before the mail courier leaves in the morning."

That night he fell asleep thinking of garrison duty in the East. There at least a man like himself might have a chance with a girl like Susan.

The brassy tones of a trumpet woke him out of a sound sleep. He heard McKenna's voice outside the door: "Get up, Homer! Taza is heading this way! The squadron is to cut him off before he reaches the border! Every man must go!"

McKenna pounded off. Every man must go. As though they had to order him. He kicked aside the shoes he usually wore and pulled on his boots. The inner soles were wrinkled from little use. His cartridge belt was tight; he must be putting on weight. He yanked his carbine from its pegs and clapped

his new campaign hat on his head. He thrust his saber under his arm and opened the door. It was nearly dawn.

Lights winked on all over the quadrangle. Homer ran for the stables. His belt *was* too tight; he could hardly breathe as he led Zebra to the waiting ranks.

"Attention!"

The long ranks steadied. The jingle of spurs announced Major Annistoun, post commander. He stopped beside Lieutenant Marbury. "We're short of officers as usual," Annistoun said peervishly. "Carter on leave, Dillon in hospital at Fort Grant, and Owens killed two months ago. I meant to leave you in charge, but you'll have to go. You know General Crook's orders: hang on to the trail. Surrender or annihilation." He paused and looked at the squadron. "We'll have to leave a good non-com. Taza will not fool around here when he knows the whole military district is on his heels. We'll be between him and the post. He means to make it to Mexico. We can deal with him and get back here in plenty of time."

"It's hard for Farrier Corporal McKenna to ride, sir."

"No. No. Likes his bottle too well."

"There's Quartermaster Sergeant Keene, sir. A sound reliable man. McKenna could give him a hand."

Homer's heart sank. He felt immensely silly standing there with his shiny, little-used equipment.

"Sergeant Keene!" the major called.

Pale light was touching the eastern sky as he stepped forward. What a ridiculous figure he must cut to these frontier veterans.

Annistoun's eyes flicked over Homer with the faintest trace of a smile. Homer drew in his paunch but his cartridge belt sagged so he had to let it out again.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Keene. We need a good man to take charge here. I'll leave three men from each company. There are three convalescents in the hospital and two men in the guardhouse you can use if necessary. I can't spare another man."

The major motioned to his trumpeter. The sun tipped the hills. It glittered brassily on the metal of harness and weapon.

"Prepare to mount! Mount!"

THE troopers smashed into their saddles. Guidons fluttered up.

"Fours Right! Trot—*march!*"

Homer watched his chance for glory ride away. He gave his orders to the little detachment left behind. Prisoners to water and feed the horses. There was a large cavvy of replacement mounts in the corral. Guards to be posted at gate, magazine and stables. The men left behind were the dross of K and L. No company commander going into action would leave good men behind.

The morning inched by. Homer avoided Susan. She was one of eight women left on the post. Major Annistoun's wife, the only officer's wife at Fort Conroy, and six laundresses, enlisted men's wives who lived on Soapsuds Row, made up the balance.

By ten Homer had lost all interest in the work at his desk. He dozed off to be awakened by the pound of hoofs. He hit the floor with a jolt as the door banged open. It was Andrews of L, dusty and scared.

"The major sent me back for his field-glasses. I took the short cut through Oak Canon. It's full of Apaches. They're heading here! Their horses was wore out and I outran 'em."

"Why would they come here?" asked Homer hoarsely.

"Ain't but two ways to go from Oak Canon," said Andrews sarcastically, "towards the squadron and back here. They need horses and the squadron is gone. There's one thing else I know—the major ain't chasin' Taza toward the *rio.*"

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw him at Oak Canon. But you got some time yet, Sarge. They won't rush the fort until they're sure it's a cinch."

Homer ran to the door. The people of the fort were grouped outside. "Taza is on his way here. You women get into the warehouse. Take plenty of water. Burton, get up on the roof of the gate house and let me know whenever you see something suspicious. Who'll volunteer to ride for the squadron?"

"I'll go," Rebel Carruthers drawled. "Let me take that big hunter of the major's."

Homer knew that ordinarily these men would have grinned irritatingly at him be-

fore they obeyed an order. But the name Apache was enough to put spring into the most reluctant muscles. Lieutenant Marbury had told Homer one day, "The name Apache is not known in their language. They call themselves *Tinneh*, which means man or people. The name Apache has been given to them by their foes. It means simply—The Enemy!"

It was a hushed group that awaited Homer in the stuffy warehouse. It was built strongly of stone with a parapeted adobe roof and was loopholed. Homer grounded his carbine and leaned on it. He knew Susan's eyes were on him.

"The Apaches won't rush us right away," Homer told the garrison. "Too cautious. The squadron is probably chasing a decoy party. Taza must know there is a small guard here. He needs horses to get to Mexico. He's going to gamble on getting them here. So we'll gamble too. He'll be up in the hills about the fort very soon now."

Andrews came in. "The Rebel is gone," Andrews reported. "He'll have to go the long way around but he'll make it if any man can."

Homer nodded. "We could hole up here indefinitely but we must do more than that. Those horses are worth about one hundred and thirty-two dollars each to the government but they'd cost a lot more if Taza gets them."

"What do ye propose to do, Sarge?" asked Tim.

Homer turned to Andrews. "How many warriors would you say Taza has with him?"

"Seventy or eighty at the most."

HOMER looked out the door. Burton waved his hand from his post atop the gatehouse and shook his head. Homer turned to the group and said: "We must try and give the Chiricahuas the illusion that there is a strong guard here. Much too strong for them to try for the horses. Taza may know post routine. He's probably watched it many a time while we were at peace with him. But if we work it the right way we may fool him. First we need someone to play the post calls."

[*Turn page*]

HAD NEVER WRITTEN A LINE . . . SELLS ARTICLE BEFORE COMPLETING COURSE

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Susan stepped forward. "I can do it. Trumpeter-Corporal Riley once taught me most of the calls."

"It might be dangerous, Susan," Homer warned her.

"It might be more dangerous if I don't do it."

Homer shrugged. "Schmidt, get a fire going in the cook shack. McKenna, take three men to the stables and make them look like ten. Keep them moving about at that end of the post. You ladies will find revolvers in the rack just behind you. You know how to use them. Keep them with you and go about your usual business."

Homer took five men with pickaxes. They hacked holes in the walls of abutting buildings. They were big enough for a man to wriggle through from one building to another. Susan was waiting for his orders when they finished. She wore a small size blouse and trumpeter's trousers complete with double yellow stripe down the seams. A forage cap was tilted over her hacked off hair. A trumpet was slung from her shoulder. For a minute or two Homer could not tear his eyes from her trim figure.

Susan said, "Trumpeter Dortmund is a small man, Homer."

Homer assembled his men and told them: "Keep circulating just as McKenna's men are doing. Go from one building to another. Change part of your uniform and come out of the next building. Carry a carbine into one building and bring a box out of the next. Go into a building in pairs and come out alone. Remember some of the keenest eyes in the world may be watching you. Keep moving!"

They had more field experience than he did but this was a job for a better head than theirs and they knew it. Homer dismissed them and walked casually across the parade ground. He watched the hills out of the corners of his eyes. A hawk was circling lazily through the shimmering heat waves. The hills reminded him of the bleached skulls of men long dead. He wondered how he had ever thought them beautiful. He reached Major Annistoun's office and put on the officer's dress blouse. He looked at himself in the cracked mirror.

"Time for Recall, Major Keene," a girl's voice said.

He spun about. Susan smiled.

"Go ahead, trumpeter," Homer told her.

She went to her post and unslung the trumpet. She put the instrument to her lips. Homer envied the mouthpiece. At first the notes were uneven but she soon swung into it. Three men came from the stables and entered the barracks. A moment later two others followed them. Tim was playing the part of assistant director well.

Burton came down from his post. He kept glancing uncertainly over his shoulders. "Something is moving on Keg Hill, Sarge."

Homer focussed the major's field-glasses on the hill. The hawk was gone. A moccasined foot protruded beyond some ocotillo.

THE play went on. A trooper came out of the barracks clad in forage cap and blouse and entered the hospital. A moment later he appeared out of the officer's quarters wearing a campaign hat and returned to the barracks. One trooper came out of the commissary and entered the magazine. He reappeared with two other troopers and entered the warehouse. Mrs. Annistoun knitted placidly in front of her quarters. The laundresses scrubbed clothes behind their shacks.

Susan came into headquarters after a call. She was white and tense.

"You're playing a fine part, Susan," Homer encouraged her.

"I'll never want to be an actress again," she answered. "Do you think it will work?"

"We have them puzzled but Taza is no fool. He has to have those horses."

"Surely if we've fooled them this long, we can keep it up."

Homer nodded but he could not meet her eyes. They could make a try at Stables at four p.m. but Retreat and Parade would destroy the whole illusion. The whole garrison must parade at sunset. They could not fool Taza then.

The afternoon crept by with the men still plodding methodically from building to building. One of them sat outside the cook shack peeling potatoes. Homer wondered who would eat them.

McKenna came into headquarters. "Apaches or no, 'tis me duty to get them new horses shod. And Timothy McKenna will not let them red devils interfere with the orders of the United States Army!"

So the smoke rose from the blacksmith's shop and the regular ring of sledge on iron carried to the hills.

Before sunset Homer went into various buildings to find all the men. They were shaken under the strain. "Get to the warehouse at intervals within the next half hour," Homer directed. "We may be able to cover the corral with our carbines. We'll lose some horses but they'll pay for them."

They had done the best they could and had cost Taza precious time. They were very quiet as they assembled in the warehouse. Homer smiled reassuringly.

"We've won so far. But in a few minutes they'll know something is wrong."

The dust motes danced in the shaft of light from a loophole. The shaft moved slowly across the floor as the sun tipped toward the west. The sun touched the tops of the western hills. Sweat soaked through Homer's shirt.

Young Barton cleared his throat. Angry voices snarled at him. There would be about one more hour of good light. One of the laundresses sobbed aloud.

There was silence when the trumpet should have blown Assembly for Retreat. The parade ground was deserted. The flag flapped idly on its gaunt pole. Long shadows crept down the brown slopes of the hills. There was no outpouring of men from the barracks. No one led horses from the stables. The hills brooded under their lengthening shadows.

Long minutes dragged by. Now and then there was the click-click of a breech being thrown open as a trooper made sure his carbine was loaded. Homer could almost feel the ring of Apaches stealing catlike down the arroyos. *They knew now.*

There was a vicious swish. Something clattered on the roof. The noise sent a whip of nettles across taut nerves.

Andrew's face paled. "Arrows!" he said. "The devils are close."

[*Turn page*]

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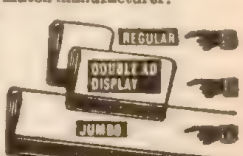

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SOON there was another swish and clatter. Homer's nostrils twitched. Smoke! Fire arrows! The roof was piled with seasoning lumber. He had forgotten about that.

The adobe roof would not last long under the heat from above. Then the roof beams would start to go. The Apaches would not appear until the blinded, coughing defenders were driven from the ware house. The Apaches did not waste men in sieges. He should have thought of the lumber on the roof. He had failed.

The heat grew stifling. Wood crackled. Bits of adobe fell. A big lump smashed a packing case. It aroused Homer from his stupor. There were valuable surveying instruments back there. He groped his way to the rear. The heat and smoke were thickest there. He passed cases forward to the other men. Bits of adobe pattered about him like dry rain.

"It won't be long now," growled McKenna wiping his face. "Why don't the bloody devils rush us and have done with it?"

A square of ceiling fell. Smoke billowed through the warehouse. A low chant came from outside.

"*Hoo. Hoo. Hoo. Ahoo!*"

Homer looked at Tim.

"Aye. They're getting ready for the reel, Sarge."

Homer heaved a heavy case toward the farrier. There was a cracking noise overhead. He was hit with stunning force on the nape of his neck and his right shoulder. He went down and sprawled flat on the floor. He raised his head. He could see nothing but swirling smoky darkness. A woman shrieked.

"Homer is back there!" It was Susan.

"The roof is collapsing!" roared McKenna, "ye cannot go after him! Men! Will ye die in here like flies or will ye folly Tim McKenna?"

The door bars rattled to the floor. A patch of lighter shadow showed against the front wall. Homer tried to shout but he could not. Boots thudded as the men raced outside to come to grips with the raiders.

Homer got to his feet and staggered forward. A square of ceiling dropped and

smashed just where he had been lying. The women were huddled back against the walls. Susan ran forward. Homer held her back with his good left hand.

"The men, Susan. Are they all gone?"

She nodded.

"Give me a pistol."

She handed him a Colt. He cocked it awkwardly.

"The fools!" he said. "To leave you unprotected."

She looked at him oddly.

Shots crackled out all over the parade ground. A man shouted hoarsely. A horse screamed.

Homer staggered to the door and leaned against the wall. Feet slapped against the hard earth. A stocky buckskin kilted figure raced toward him. He yanked the trigger. The Colt roared and kicked back in his hand. The warrior dived sideways. Homer reached across his body with his aching right arm and cocked the Colt again and fired. Four more times he fired at the sprawling Apache. Smoke billowed about him. He walked stiffly outside. A shadow loomed up through the smoke. He pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked against an empty shell.

The buck closed in. The stench of his greasy clothing sickened Homer. He was slammed back against the wall. Instinctively he brought his knee up into the warrior's groin. The buck gasped and staggered back. His face was a mask of fury. He swung the barrel of his rifle sideways just as a gun roared close beside Homer. The Apache went down but as he did so the barrel of his rifle landed with a dull thud alongside Homer's head. Homer fell forward across the Chiricahua's body. Homer's senses swam in a red hazy sea. He felt the warrior try to get up but Homer closed his left hand on the Apache's throat and squeezed with all the power he could muster. The Apache lay still. Homer sank across his body and drifted down into a sea of smoky darkness.

BEFORE he opened his eyes he seemed to hear Susan's voice. Odd that she should speak in an Irish dialect.

"Wake up, Homer," she said huskily,

[*Turn page*]

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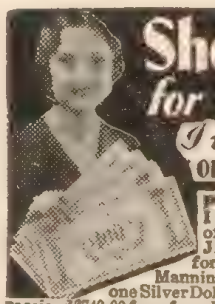

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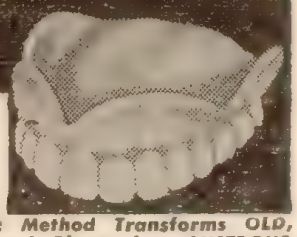

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"You're not dead yet and ye owe the government twenty years to make ye a thirty-year man."

He opened his eyes to see McKenna's smoke blackened face peering down at him. Homer was lying on his bunk in their quarters. Lieutenant Marbury looked over Tim's shoulder.

"What happened, Tim?" Homer asked.

"Ye been out a good two hours, Sarge," McKenna answered. "When I led the boys out I nivir thought the red divils might cut in behind us. We drove them away from the corrals three times as though it was a scrap at Donegal Fair. We lost a few of our boys on the way. If ye had not put up such a battle at the warehouse, the ladies would have been slaughtered. Aye! Ye must have fought like a demon. In the melee we heard the trumpets in the hills. The squadron, like dusty whiskered angels, came down the trail and ran them bloody screechin' divils back to hell!"

Lieutenant Marbury pressed Homer's left hand. "Fine work, Keene. You had us worried. The major is anxious to see you."

Homer got to his feet. His face and hands were covered with blisters. He could smell singed hair. There was a great lump on his head caked with dried blood.

It was dark outside but the lights of the buildings glowed through the night. McKenna came to the door and pointed to the hospital. "Some of the boys are payin' the piper this night." He glanced sideways at Homer. "Miss Susan is over there helpin' out."

Homer limped across the parade ground. He stared at a dark shadow at his feet. He jumped. It was an Apache crumpled in death. The bands of white paint across the bridge of his nose and cheekbones gave him an unearthly look. Here and there about the parade ground were other dark still figures. Metal clinked against hard earth and stones over at the post cemetery.

Major Annistoun waved Homer to a seat. "The squadron is certainly proud of you, Sergeant. It took a real bit of strategy to keep Taza from those horses. I'm recommending you for a Medal of Honor. General Crook wanted Taza taken and through you

the job was done. Your recommendation will go forward to Department Headquarters tomorrow morning with a report on the action. I have a rough draft here." The major picked up a sheet of paper from his desk: " 'Quartermaster-Sergeant Homer S. Keene, while in charge of a small guard detachment at Fort Conroy, Arizona Territory, by the use of stratagem, held a greatly superior force of Apaches at bay, preventing the Apaches from capturing horses necessary for their escape to Mexico. This delay caused their capture or destruction. Displaying great coolness, Sergeant Keene also fought a dangerous fire while besieged by these Apaches, and saved valuable government property at the risk of his life. He courageously defended the women of the post against an attack by Apache warriors and personally accounted for the deaths of two of them. In so doing he sustained numerous painful burns and injuries.' "

HOMER hardly heard him.

"How does it sound, Sergeant?" Annistoun asked.

"Very good, sir. It reads far better than it actually was."

"The recommendation goes through and if I know George Crook he'll see to it that you get it. And Keene—" The major stood up and gripped Homer's left hand. "My personal thanks and gratitude for saving Mrs. Annistoun. I'll never forget it. Now you had better get some medical treatment."

Homer reddened and then limped slowly out of the room. They made it sound so heroic. He walked toward the hospital. Suddenly he pulled in his stomach and straightened his shoulders. Perhaps he had a chance with Susan now. He would be a Medal of Honor man. There would be only two of them on the post. Major Annistoun, who had won his at Stone's River in the War, and himself. Even the dashing O'Malley had never been recommended for one. Not bad for a mothball herder like Homer. *A Medal of Honor.*

The smell of blood, sweat and carbolic nauseated him when he entered the hospital.

"Good old Sergeant Keene!" someone yelled.

[*Turn page*]

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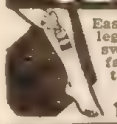

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Homer grinned in embarrassment, breaking a blister on his lip. Susan was adjusting a bandage on a trooper's head. It was Dan O'Malley.

A trooper jerked a thumb at O'Malley, and said: "Another hero, Sarge. Led the platoon that cut off Taza's retreat. Wiped them out and killed Taza hand to hand. He's got Taza's famous battle shirt. Major Annistoun said it was the finest piece of field soldiering he had seen."

Homer limped to the bed. O'Malley had the blood stained buckskin shirt across his knees. He grinned and held out a big fist. "Good work, Homer. Thanks for taking care of Susan. Here. Take this battleshirt. It's yours."

Homer looked dumbly at Susan.

"Dan is to be commissioned in the field, Homer."

O'Malley held up the shirt. "And it's to be Mrs. Second Lieutenant Daniel O'Malley when I put up my bars," He circled Susan's waist with his right arm.

Susan looked down at him and then up at Homer. She started to speak but Homer did not wait. He hardly remembered congratulating them. "Give the shirt to your firstborn," he finished lamely and turned quickly to the door. Water ran down his face as he walked to his quarters. But it was not a breaking blister.

McKenna was sitting on his bunk when Homer came in. Homer looked into his mirror. His face was a mess of soot and dirt. Two white runnels ran beneath his eyes.

"Breakin' blisters," he said and sat down heavily. He buried his face in his hands.

"How was it, Homer?"

"She's to marry O'Malley."

"Is that so? Well, so it goes." Tim hesitated. "I've heard about the Medal of Honor. 'Tis a fine thing for a man to have."

BLEAKLY Homer looked into the Irishman's wise old eyes. Somehow Homer knew he had been as close to a battle as he would ever get. He reached under his bunk and pulled out his footlocker. He drew out the bottle of cognac from where it nestled in a wooly cradle of winter underwear. He passed it to Tim.

"Farrier Corporal Timothy McKenna, will you do me the honor of helping me wet down my Medal of Honor?"

"Aye, that I will."

McKenna reached across for the bottle and then looked past Homer toward the door. His eyes widened. He looked at Homer. "And ye better drink a toast to Miss Susan Carstens for firing the shot that scuppered that Apache after your blood."

Homer looked up quickly. "Was it she? I'll thank her tomorrow."

A voice broke in behind him. "Please thank me now, Homer."

He turned. It was Susan. She smiled. "I came as quickly as I could, Homer."

He stood up. "I don't understand."

"It was Dan's idea. Not mine. You didn't let me explain."

McKenna winked and jerked a thumb toward the door. Homer got up. The room seemed full of haze. He took her arm and guided her out into the darkness.

Out on the parade ground Trumpeter Corporal Riley blew gently into his trumpet to warm it. As the first lilting notes of *Tattoo* echoed back from the silent hills Homer drew Susan close.

TRAIL CAMP

(Continued from page 6)

With his recent terrible experience floating in the back of his thoughts, Mooney talked rapidly and convincingly to his business prospect for a few moments. Then there was an interruption. A man, weighted with weapons, came hurriedly into the store, speaking to the store owner with urgent rapidity, off to one side, out of Mooney's hearing.

The travelling man did hear the word "Indian" several times, and he began to sidle toward the door when the storekeeper caught his arm.

"This is Captain Kress of the Home Guards, Mr. Mooney," the storeman said. "It seems that Lewiston may have some excitement. The Nez Perce are having war-dances around their campfire tonight. We may expect an attack almost any time. You understand that we'll have to postpone our conversation—not indefinitely, I hope."

With these words the storekeeper began donning a hat, coat and finally a revolver, while

[*Turn page*]

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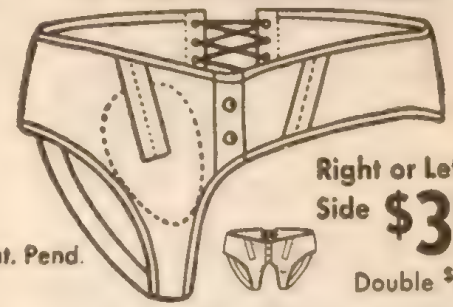

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Mooney stared, rooted to one spot.

At last he moved toward the door, and was halted by Captain Kress' quiet words. "Mr. Mooney, we hate to ask it of a visitor, but we must request your help tonight. Many men are required to guard the town."

"I—I—I don't care to fight Indians, Captain," Mooney stuttered. "Besides, I—I—I have no gun. And I have business to take care of—I—"

"Mr. Mooney!" The Captain's voice was stern. "We all have a business, homes, loved ones we must protect! You will be issued the proper equipment, and will take your turn at guard duty."

"Do Your Duty!"

A long, heavy gun was shoved into Mooney's shaking hands. He held it gingerly, as though expecting it to explode any moment. "Please—at least let me send a wire to Portland telling my people of the danger, and what they are to do with the property if something—if something—"

"Sorry, old man. No time for that," the Captain said brusquely. "Here are the guards now. Join me at the head of the column."

Reluctantly, Mooney fell into the line of armed men, and numbly followed the Captain as he walked through Main Street to the Snake River, then angled up a steep hill that overlooked the town. At last the column halted and Mooney stared about him in the darkness, seeing the trench that had been dug out of the hillside the previous year.

"This is your post, Mr. Mooney. You are to fire your revolver once if you see anything amiss. The password is 'Lewiston.' Do your duty now."

Jake Mooney was left all alone in the darkness, and he resisted the urge to run after the clumping sound of the men moving down the hillside. He huddled down, clutching the revolver, and soon all he could hear were the muted sounds of the town, the river and occasionally the lonely wail of a coyote in the hills.

Dragging Hours

The hours dragged by, incredibly lonely and long in the deep darkness. Mooney strained his eyes, and every time some small animal moved, or an insect sang, he was sure the attack was coming. He tried to see what time his big watch said, but he couldn't see the hands. At last, shakily, telling himself that he was crazy, that

he would be shot down instantly, he struck a match to see the hands. It was almost twelve, and a surge of indignation stirred Mooney. No guard should be made to stand so many hours. He would simply return to the town.

With this idea in mind, he got up—and then he tumbled back into the trench, bringing the gun up, for the night was suddenly hideous with shrill warwhoops and blanketed figures that seemed to spring from nowhere and everywhere.

Shaking, breathing a prayer of hope, Mooney brought the revolver up, cocking it. Shots rang out, and the darkness was split with flashes of light. On and on the blanketed, screaming figures advanced. Mooney at last managed to pull the trigger.

The only response was a dull *thud!* He tried again, with the same result. The shells were no good. With a scream of terror, Mooney threw the gun down and started down the hill. The River would be better than an Indian's tomahawk! With surprising agility he cleared all obstacles in his path and was near the water's edge when three figures stepped into his path. Someone caught him and Mooney screamed, then gasped with relief when he saw it was a white man. All was quiet on the hillside now.

A Good Job

"You've done a good job, Mr. Mooney," the man holding him said. "The attack has been repulsed."

"Just let me go to the hotel," Mooney begged.

He staggered toward town, and behind him eight or ten men met, took off their blankets and warpaint, and sat down and howled with laughter. It had been the best Indian raid in Lewiston's history!

Possibly Jake Mooney heard of the rather shameful practical joke that had been played on him. But he didn't stay around to protest. He took the stage for Portland the next day. His business had expanded too far!

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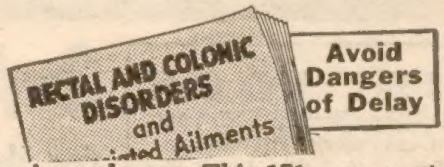

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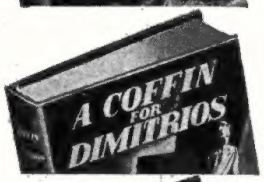

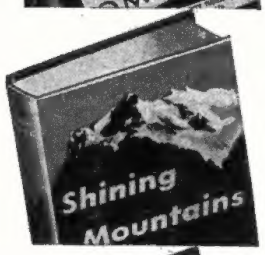

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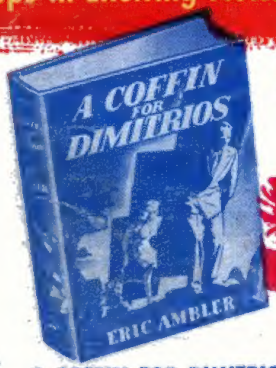

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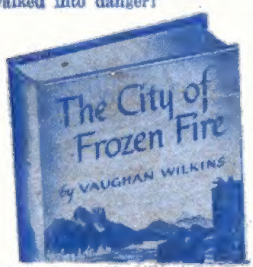

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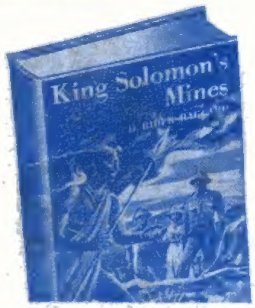

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